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Research Article

Implementing the updated early childhood development curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools: social validity based on practitioners' views

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Abstract

This article analysed the level of social validity on implementing the updated Early Childhood Development (ECD) curriculum in Epworth, Mabvuku, Tafara (EPMAFARA) District in Harare, Zimbabwe. To address the ever-changing world economy, Zimbabwe introduced an updated curriculum in all its primary schools, in 2017. The updated curriculum provides a framework for the knowledge that help young people to develop a sense of independence and self-reliance. A qualitative method was employed to explore curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean primary schools. Data were collected from a purposively selected sample of two District Schools Inspectors, four School Heads/ Teachers in Charge and eight ECD teachers. The data were analysed using the NVivo software. The researchers discovered that as well as exposing some gaps in the implementation practice, the study revealed some advantages namely, competence-based component, child centred methods, skills-based approaches, change and nurturing of various children's talents among others. The disadvantages encountered comprised lack of financial and human resources and school basic infrastructures, excessive workload for teachers, lack of Information, Communication and Technology skills and high- teacher: pupil ratio. The qualitative research method used was one major limitation since it was time consuming and, labour intensive. The researchers' initial sample was further affected by COVID-19's onset in the country in March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) advised lockdown restrictions, causing schools to close abruptly. The paper's findings underscored the significance of planning for change in ECD educational programs in terms of teachers' preparedness and stakeholders' resourcefulness. These findings imply that teachers should be trained to become innovative and creative in curriculum implementation. Stakeholders are recommended to support teachers and schools with prerequisite resources.

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Introduction

One of the seminal changes that occurred with the advent of a democratic government was the change in the education system. Access to high-quality, relevant education for all Zimbabweans is seen as a fundamental right and the bedrock of the country's cultural, social, economic, and democratic development (Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013:46; Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework, 2015:4). Early years practices are very influential in a child's holistic development matrix hence the importance of Early Childhood Development (ECD) education. ECD is an important component of basic education and the first step in achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals established at the 1990 World Conference on EFA in Jomtien, Thailand, the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and the United Nations

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Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Myers, 2004:3; Soud, 2009:23). This led to rethinking on ECD and its mandatory inclusion in primary schools. The ECD updated curriculum in the country was the brainchild of Dr Lazarus Dokora, the former Minister of Primary and Secondary Education. The blueprint was an attempt to buttress the Nziramasanga Commission (CIET, 1999), recommendations to avail pre-primary education to all Zimbabwean citizens irrespective of their social status.

Zimbabwe attained its independence on 18th April 1980 and the government in 1982 started redressing the discrepancies in early childhood education (ECE) which was predominantly for white children. The previous curriculum was also chastised for being overly intellectual and preventing students from pursuing mechanical interests at an early age. The need for things to change resulted in the proliferation of ECE centres, especially in rural locations, housed under trees and staffed by inexperienced workers. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was housed in the ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs which had 'little to do with education' (Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, 1996). In 1988, ECE was transferred to the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education. The transfer of ECE to that ministry did not make much headway, with the majority of the children in the rural areas still not benefitting from the initiative. The thrust was on preparing children for school readiness but there was not much progress noted, hence there was need to restructure the programme for it to produce the desired goals. The Ministry of Education only offered a policy framework to oversee ECE centres run by local governments, communities, church groups, private organizations, and individuals during this time (UNESCO, 2006). With the passage of time, education officials and other interested parties noticed that much of the curricula in private pre-schools was obsolete and insufficient for children of school age, and that family circumstances were not conducive to learning (UNESCO 2006). It became incumbent for collaboration and coordination across all levels and ministries to ensure a strong and cohesive ECE policy (UNICEF, 2009).

Grade Zero / ECE was mandated to be adopted in all primary schools with effect from 2006, after choices reached in 2005 to guarantee that every child had a fair start (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 2006). As a result, it was absorbed into the general education development policy framework and formed part of Zimbabwe's overall development reality, which is now coherent, methodical, complete, and proactive. The Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture released Secretary's Circular 14 of 2004 for primary schools to attach two ECD classes (A and B) with effect from 2005. According to the Director's Circular Number 12 of 2005, the class of 3-4-year olds was called ECD A and the class of 4-5-year olds was ECD B (Mushoriwa & Muzembe, 2011).

Hitherto, the bulk of Zimbabwean children, particularly those in rural areas and other low-income communities, did not have access to the recently implemented Grade Zero/ECE program. To address this anomaly, a new two-tier curriculum starting at ECD A to ECD B was introduced in primary schools in 2017, and no child would be accepted into grade one without attending ECD for the two years. The current ECD updated curriculum is the blueprint covering the period 2015-2022 premised on government policy. The Daily News (2018:1) reported that the launch of the Zimbabwe new Curriculum Framework in Kadoma, a town in Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe, in June 2018, sparked heated debate with parents and teachers accusing the government of railroading the programme into the educational system without adequate consultations (Muzembe, 2021). Despite the criticism, the updated ECD curriculum is competence based and it promotes collaboration among learners.

Figure 1.

Understanding the Updated/Competence Based Curriculum Source: Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2015-2022) http://mopse.co.zw/mopse/about-ministry

Teachers are frontline service providers in education and have the responsibility for preparing the children for a better future. This means that teachers must keep abreast with changes in 'education' especially in today's digital world where 'internet' has created a global village. Hence, computer skills for ECD teachers become critical in the instruction of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM) in their practices. It also implies that the Ministry of Education must harness ICT as enabling learning tools in schools to ensure continuous learning for children now under the looming shadow of COVID-19.

The Research Significance

The social significance of ECD curriculum implementation is to evaluate the social validity that elucidates the child behaviour change in achieving educational goals. There is still inadequate information on how practitioners in economic crises and looming COVID-19 pandemic implement the ECD updated curriculum considering social and economic variations in the country. Despite previous research on curriculum implementation conducted across the globe, in Zimbabwe there is minimal focus on how teachers and stakeholders prepare to improve the process. It is against this backdrop that a research becomes significant to be carried out. The study highlighted the advantages and limitations of the updated ECD curriculum. This study informs the policy makers, stakeholders, and other citizens on the best way to prepare and support teachers in the curriculum implementation process. In the main, it is envisaged that this research enriches the secondary sources of education information for colleges and universities as it forms a firm foundation where future research can be laid upon.

The Research Terms

Curriculum Implementation

The translation of an anticipated or formally created course of study into syllabuses, plans of work, and lessons to be delivered to students is referred to as curriculum implementation (Bediako, 2019). It is also the actual interaction of the learner with expected learning opportunities. This includes the instructional materials that will be used in the classroom.

Early Childhood Development

The term "early childhood development" refers to the time between conception and the start of school. It is a window of opportunity for a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development that occurs because of the child's contact with his or her surroundings (UNICEF 2018:2).

ECD A and ECD B

In Zimbabwe, ECD A refers to children aged 3 to 4 years, while ECD B refers to children aged 4-5 years. As a result of the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) recommendation, this was effected as a regulation.

Innovation

According to Bessant (2009:6), the word 'innovation' comes from the Latin words in and novare, meaning "to make something new, to change." Innovation is therefore the application of ideas to create new ways of doing things.

Practitioners' views

The practitioners' views about curriculum implementation refer to the District Schools Inspectors', school Heads'/ TICs' and Teachers' mindset in the manner they think and feel towards what they are supposed to do. A view is not shaped in a vacuum, it determines our approach to life and relationships with others.

Social validity

The suggested intervention and the planned replacement behaviour's social validity refers to whether they are socially acceptable behaviours (Kazdin, 1977).

Literature Review

The analysis of related literature directs the research, demonstrates the evolution of knowledge, and combines and summarises what is known as the subject area. The ever-growing world economy has brought new challenges and new requirements in the education division (Mulena & Kabombwe 2019). The European Pillar of Social Rights was discussed, and ECD was mentioned as an important part of it, in the most recent European Union (EU) Council Recommendation. It builds the groundwork for lifelong learning in school (Council of the EU 2019). However, ECD curriculum implementation is frequently hampered by a lack of core management, which translates to a lack of clear-cut procedures in many activities, such as resource allocation.

Bertram and Pascal (2016:4) stated that different countries have implemented improvements to their early childhood systems, with a focus on enhanced training and school preparedness. Most European Union countries have extended access to the sector by introducing or revising their teacher education programs and curricula (OECD, 2015). Globally, ECE access is a challenge, with inadequate provision and significant disparities among countries with varying

degrees of development (UNESCO, 2019). It was important in this study to explore advantages and limitations of the updated ECD curriculum with emphasis on access to ICT.

According to several research, Indonesia's education system has issues with unequal access, low teacher quality, and poor infrastructure (Octarra &Hendriati, 2017). International organizations have exerted influence in local areas to benefit children and their families, as demonstrated in Early Childhood Development. The National Mid-Term Development Planning 2015-2019 in Indonesia aimed to enhance people's life in rural areas, where many ECE centres utilised recycled materials.

Considering the findings in Indonesia, it became imperative to investigate this aspect in Africa, particularly in Zimbabwean ECD centres. Ajuoga and Keta (2021) have noted that a number of African governments have introduced Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) in their countries. The aim of the CBC in both Rwanda and Kenya was to equip learners with hands on skills, instead of just concentrating on the academics. The new curriculum focusses on the success of each learner, it is child centred. The CBC is more efficient since the teacher is the facilitator of learning and not the provider of information.

However, one of the overarching impediments in African countries is the low teacher quality due to poor quality of training in ECD (Sooter, 2013). In Nigeria, Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016:35) observed that all instructors for ECD were not trained. In South Africa, the Western Cape Department of Social Development (WCDSD 2010) cited some challenges during implementation of ECD as; poor training of ECD teachers, poor infrastructure, lack of learning and teaching resources, non-availability of standardised curriculum, institutional barriers, and less involvement of the private sector. Ntumi (2016:56), highlighted that inadequate resources and infrastructure led to a host of other problems, such as hot sitting. To address the issue of poorly trained teachers, the New Zealand government retrained all teachers who had Primary School Teaching Diploma qualifications for three years in ECE (Rous 2004:20 in Modise 2017:45). In Zimbabwe, however, Dyanda and Dozva (2012) reported that ECD centres in primary schools were staffed by competent teachers with a Diploma in ECD. It was however imperative to find out if their qualifications enabled them to implement the updated curriculum effectively.

Although teachers were trained, Ngwenya (2019) reported factors such as human, physical, material, and financial resources as barriers to curriculum implementation. In a later study, Madondo (2020: 13) argued that lack of resources, infrastructure, ICT gadgets and skills, lack of support hindered successful curriculum implementation. According to Mupondi-Masuka, Nyika, and Kangai (2017), overcrowding is closely associated to high teacher-to-pupil ratios in Gweru urban schools, where teacher-to-pupil ratios were as high as 1:50, well beyond the government-mandated 1:20 ratio stated in Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005. Similarly, alarming levels of overcrowding with pupils ranging from 70-100 per class were noted in Kenya (Pale and Amukowa, 2020). Previously, Rose Odoyo (2015) had called for construction of additional classrooms to avert overcrowding. Rugare (2017) also observed large classes and congested timetables and their negative effect on teacher efficacy. In Kenya, Momanyi and Rop (2019) and Ondimu (2018) noted gaps during preparations of books and delays in publication of books and sometimes it was not easy to get books for a particular class. Rugare (2017) expressed similar thoughts, stating that the Ministry of Education had identified resources to be utilized under the new ECD curriculum, but that majority of the textbooks had not yet been published, making it impossible for teachers to follow the curriculum.

Notwithstanding what could be said about the lack of resources in developing countries, the change and innovation in those countries' education systems and curriculum implementation appear to be a universal practice in such countries as well. Zimbabwe is a developing country that looks to other countries for lessons on ECD curriculum implementation. The government's previous initiatives were mentioned. Whilst not taking away anything from previous research whether globally, regionally, or locally, it was necessary to critically analyse the current ECD programme and see if there are unique pros and cons influencing its implementation.

The Research Objectives and Questions

Some of the objectives which had to be achieved first were to:

- evaluate the social validity of the updated ECD curriculum
- determine advantages of the updated ECD curriculum
- determine limitations of the updated ECD curriculum
- analyse practitioners' views on implementing the updated ECD curriculum.

The central question was:

What are the advantages and limitations of implementing the updated ECD curriculum in Zimbabwe?

The following questions guided the study:

- How socially valid is the updated ECD curriculum?

- What are the advantages of the updated ECD curriculum?
- What are the limitations of the updated ECD curriculum?
- What are the effects of practitioners' views on implementing the updated curriculum?

Method

The study employed the qualitative research method which captures the nuances, subjectivities, and illustrative basis for participants' responses. Qualitative research seeks to understand a person's perspective of the world, from his or her own point of view (Creswell, 2014:205). The approach entails studying a phenomenon, in its natural context. It uses descriptive data in its research reports and the investigation is holistic. Through the qualitative approach, we interacted with DSIs, Heads of schools/TICs and ECD teachers and carried out lesson observations in the ECD departments. The decision to conduct research directly in schools helped to ensure that frontline stakeholders in ECD curriculum implementation could be reached. Data were collected through the qualitative approach, from the primary schools and Ministry of Education records.

Population and Sample of Study

Population refers to any group of people who share one or more qualities that the researcher is interested in (Best and Kahn, 2016: 13). Generally, this refers to all people, occasions or objects that can be involved in the study. Information obtained from District Office documents showed that the population of this study was 120 ECD teachers from 30 primary schools in EPMAFARA (Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara) District of the Harare Metropolitan Province in Zimbabwe.

Purposive sampling, according to Oppong (2013), is a procedure in which a researcher selects participants who have expertise or experience with the issues under consideration. Purposive sampling was employed to select the subjects because of their accessibility and proximity to the researchers. The sample from the population consisted of eight (8) ECD instructors, four (4) Heads or TICs from four (4) schools, and two (2) District School Inspectors. The participants chosen in this study were knowledgeable about the phenomenon in question and were inclined to proffer relevant facts about the topic.

Table 1.

Practitioners' Profile

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Qualifications
TRA1	Female	38 yrs.	10 yrs.	Diploma in ECD
TRA2	Female	32 yrs.	7 yrs.	Diploma in ECD
TRB1	Female	36 yrs.	7 yrs.	Diploma in ECD
TRB2	Male	37 yrs.	11 yrs.	Diploma in ECD
TRC1	Female	32 yrs.	3 yrs.	Diploma in ECD
TRC2	Female	36 yrs.	10 yrs.	Diploma in ECD
TRD1	Female	40 yrs.	10 yrs.	Diploma in ECD; Diploma in Planning
TRD2	Female	32 yrs.	4yrs	Diploma in ECD
Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Teaching Experience**	**Qualifications**
TICA	Female	50 yrs.	21 yrs.	EC Infant
TICB	Female	45 yrs.	23 yrs.	Bed. ECD; EC Infant
TICC	Female	58 yrs.	31 yrs.	Bed. Management; CE General
D/HEAD	Male	48 yrs.	20 yrs.	BSc. PE; Diploma in Education
DSI1	Male	57 yrs.	25 yrs.	MEd Planning Admin & Policy Studies; Bed. Primary; CE
DSI2	Female	50 yrs.	25 yrs.	MEd Special needs ;Bed .Special needs; Diploma in Education (General)

Data Collection Tools

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, instructional observations, and document analysis. The researchers administered the interview instruments personally and observed ECD teachers implementing the curriculum. This subjectivity involved in the selection and interpretation of qualitative research data made the process inductive rather than deductive as in quantitative research. Secondary data were gathered from records at District offices and schools thus, ECD department files and other teachers' class documents. This accomplished the process of triangulation.

The study was based on primary data collected through the descriptive case study. It allowed for the study of perceptions, feelings, values, views, and beliefs of the respondents. Case studies allow inferences to be made about a large group from data drawn on smaller number of individuals from that group (Yin, 2013:325). Therefore, the method has an advantage of breadth of scope. In a descriptive study, no attempt is made to change behaviour or conditions (Creswell, 2014). Thus, this research design ensured that the study became more realistic in that participants were studied in their natural settings.

The Validity and Reliability of the Study

Study credibility and trustworthiness determine the authenticity of the results and conclusions.

Validity; validity refers to how well the data acquired in the study accurately represents the study's variables. A purposive sample of the target population was used in this investigation. As well as content validity. The researchers utilized a panel of specialists to review the materials and assess their relevance to the research topic. The validity of this study was verified extensively by university colleagues in the ECD department and thesis supervisors. Their suggestions were incorporated into the software. The study's goal was to achieve high validity by reducing bias and employing a variety of techniques.

Reliability; when an instrument can reliably and consistently measure a variable and produce the same results over time, it is considered reliable (Creswell, 2013). Before the real research, a pilot test was conducted utilizing the interview schedules to ensure the tool's validity and dependability. The pilot accounted for 10% of the total sample size. Random sampling was used to conduct the pilot study in the study area. This assisted in identifying potential challenges that respondents might face, as well as determining whether the items in the research instrument would produce the data needed for the study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

We employed NVivo software to analyse taped interviews and notes as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013). We studied the data to find out the teachers' responses and reactions to the updated ECD curriculum implementation in the District. We transcribed and analysed data from interviews conducted and lesson observations, as well as documents using checklists with specific criteria to solicit views from District Schools Inspectors, ECD teachers, school heads or TICs. The data were presented on tables, figures, and diagrams. Verbatim quotes were presented for in-depth interview excerpts.

Results and Discussion

The results of this article were abstracted from the practitioners' views on the value and utility of the updated ECD curriculum. It was evident that the updated ECD curriculum has some advantages/ benefits as well as limitations/challenges. Lastly, the practitioners' views on curriculum implementation were discussed. The advantages of the updated ECD curriculum are explored first and these are summarised in the word cloud.

Figure 1.

Advantages of the Updated ECD Curriculum, Source: Own compilation from NVivo software

Advantages which came out from the study are clearly indicated on the word cloud. The most prominent are bolded namely: competence based, child centred, skills based, moving with times (i.e change), children's talents and others. The participants unanimously agreed that the updated curriculum brought about change which was beneficial to the learner. A cross section of participants identified fundamental factors that brought the changes in the curriculum. The practitioner TRD2 summarised the advantages of the updated ECD thus: *The updated curriculum is very good because it gives children life skills. They can earn a living through agriculture, drama, and theatre. They can be like Kapfupi (a comedian in Zimbabwe) or become commercial farmers.*

The updated curriculum is child centred and competence based. Overall, the participants celebrated the updated ECD curriculum in that it was hands on and matched well the 21st century expectations. DSI2 stated strongly, *the world has become dynamic; hence the new curriculum was adopted to ensure that the Zimbabwean education system is relevant to global norms.* The participants concurred that the curriculum was moving away from being subject oriented to skills oriented. This was further explained by TICC: *The learner can have skills identified at an early stage. Now we can identify the talents and skills in the learners unlike what used to happen in the old curriculum which focused on the academic.* The same observations were noted in Rwanda and Kenya by Ajuoga and Keta (2021). The ECD curriculum has been broadened to accommodate varied individual skills in children through additional disciplines such as ICT, VPA, Family and Heritage Studies, and Mass Displays. According to TRA1: *The new curriculum is now testing Music, Mass Displays, VPA so teachers will take all learning areas seriously.* This multiplicity is in line with Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences.

Another advantage of this curriculum is that it is skills based as intimated by DSI1: *The thrust of the old curriculum was on academic education. This new one is hands on. It is skills oriented. It aims to produce a well-rounded individual, who is fully equipped when they leave school, even after Grade 7.* However, these skills were not fully developed due to shortage of resources. He also lamented on the unavailability of required materials as well as the need for teachers to undergo some relevant training, to competently implement the updated ECD curriculum.

Rous (2004:20) in Modise (2017:45) noted that the New Zealand government retrained all teachers who had Primary School Teaching Diploma qualifications for three years in ECE. In Nigeria, Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016:35) observed that all instructors for ECD were not trained. Contrary, in Zimbabwean Primary schools all ECD teachers hold a Diploma in ECD (Dyanda & Dozva, 2012). All what these teachers required was hands-on training in the actual teaching of new subjects like VPA, Mass Displays, and ICT.

DSI2 characterized curriculum change or moving with the times as an advantage of the new ECD curriculum: *This updated curriculum corresponds to the twenty-first century. It looks at the child holistically. Learners learn by doing while the teacher is the facilitator.* TICB defined the new curriculum as, *"moving with the times,"* implying that it is always changing, hands-on, and relevant to the twenty-first century. Participants generally agreed that the updated curriculum helps children in skills acquisition and development. It focuses on empowering learners with self-help skills and children can earn a living through these skills. TRC2 also echoed that: *Learners are exposed to contemporary world through ICT.* The pressure was on teachers who ought to become conversant with technology which is inherent in children naturally. Arthur (2017) pointed out the importance of equipping teachers with ICT skills. Because youngsters are born in the age of the internet, teachers must keep up with the latest trends and provide opportunities for students to showcase their abilities.

The promotion of good health and 'ubuntu' was another advantage of the updated ECD curriculum. TRC2 stated this point concisely in the following excerpt: *PE is beneficial to one's health.* Children's health is promoted through subjects such as PE, Mass displays and VPA, but the teacher bemoaned on the scarcity of learning materials in these areas. It is prudent for teachers to be creative and improvise some teaching and learning materials. In Family and Heritage studies, for example, new sections in the curriculum emphasize Ubuntu/Hunhu and decision-making. These findings were also coupled with some limitations discussed in the following paragraphs.

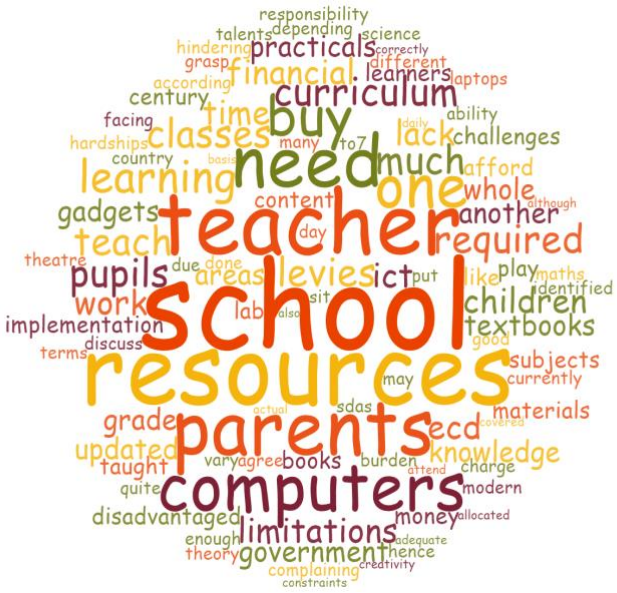

Figure 2.

Limitations of the Updated ECD Curriculum, Source: Own compilation from NVivo software

Limitations identified during curriculum implementation in EPMAFARA District include excessive workload for learners, financial and resource constraints, ICT needs, infrastructure, and high teacher-pupil ratio. The conclusions are supported and illustrated further by excerpts from participants, such as TICA's lament: *The limitations include that most schools were not prepared because it was a new concept. We don't have the funds to purchase textbooks. The curriculum's implementation is hampered by a lack of resources.* The next paragraphs go over the constraints in more detail.

Participants identified excessive workload for learners as one of the limitations as highlighted by TICB: *The work is too much. The subjects are too many to be done daily (8 learning areas). Children cannot grasp all the subjects in 20 minutes, the time is short for children to grasp the content.* The timetable was found to be congested and the work was too much for ECD pupils to do in one day. Rugare (2017), who witnessed huge classes and congested timetables and how they severely affected children' learning, also mentioned this restriction.

Another area which lent itself to analysis was the financial and material constraints. Pursuant to the issue of limitations, DSI1 lamented: *Teachers must undergo some updated sessions of training. Some schools cannot buy the required materials and gadgets to be used in the implementation of the updated curriculum. This is due to financial constraints.* Okinrotimi and Olowe (2016:34), have noticed the issue of resource scarcity. DSI1 further revealed that the government has shifted the burden of providing resources to the schools and parents.

In this study, the ubiquitous role of resources was felt across all the schools. Scarcity of textbooks was evident at all schools but more so at school A. Five classes, each with an average of 65 students, shared ten textbooks, according to TICA. Musengi (2013) described a similar situation in which teachers in several schools were forced to share a single textbook while teaching various classes. Rugare (2017), also noted that the Ministry of education had identified materials that are to be used in the updated ECD curriculum but most of the textbooks had not even been published then, thus incapacitating teachers to implement the updated curriculum efficiently. In Kenya, Pale and Amukowa (2020) also noted great scarcity of relevant books as well as teaching and learning media.

The shortage of ICT gadgets came out prominently as one of the limitations. At District level. DSI 2 had this to say*: Learning in the 21stCentury needs resources like ICT gadgets. Most of our parents cannot afford to buy the required resources for learners.* Where the provisions lack, the effectiveness of learning suffers. At school A, ECD classes to Grade 3 pupils did not do ICT practicals, only Grades 4 to 7 do ICT practicals. There was only one ICT teacher for all the junior classes and the school had forty classes. Therefore, Arthur (2017) suggested training of teachers in the use of technology.

Generally, all schools under study did not have computer labs for ECD pupils as well as the required ICT gadgets. Furthermore, the country was under extraordinary load shedding. The power outages negatively affected practical ICT learning in all schools. Most of the schools in EPMAFARA district are in disadvantaged areas and most parents cannot afford to pay for generators or Solar.

One proxy measure of a school's level of development is the level of infrastructural provision. Issues of infrastructure that are central to curriculum implementation and inadequacy or provision in pitiable state obviously affects teacher morale. The issue of infrastructure came out in response to the question on limitations of the updated

ECD curriculum implementation. The following sentence presents the verbatim utterances of TRC1: *Infrastructure and time are not adequate for learners. This results in too much paperwork.* Ntumi (2016:56) agreed that resources and infrastructure were insufficient and inadequate for learners. Lack of infrastructure led to hot sitting in all primary schools in EPMAFARA district. Scarcity of classrooms and proper furniture obstructs effective learning.

Overcrowding which was prevalent in the district put so much physical pressure on children who struggled to pay attention during lessons. It is cruel to make the children learn in such poor conditions. We call for construction of additional classrooms to avert overcrowding as suggested by Rose Odoyo (2015) in Kenya. The participants in this study all alluded to the need for more classrooms to avert overcrowding and hot sitting. Some teachers also complained about too much paperwork and inadequate time for all the subjects on the timetable. It is our contention that Schools Development Committees (SDCs) should prioritise building ECD blocks in all the schools under study. The EPMAFARA district had a high teacher-to-pupil ratio of 1:50 to 1:80, which rendered instructors ineffective because they couldn't provide each child personalized attention. Higher teacher-to-pupil ratios reduced instructors' ability to teach.

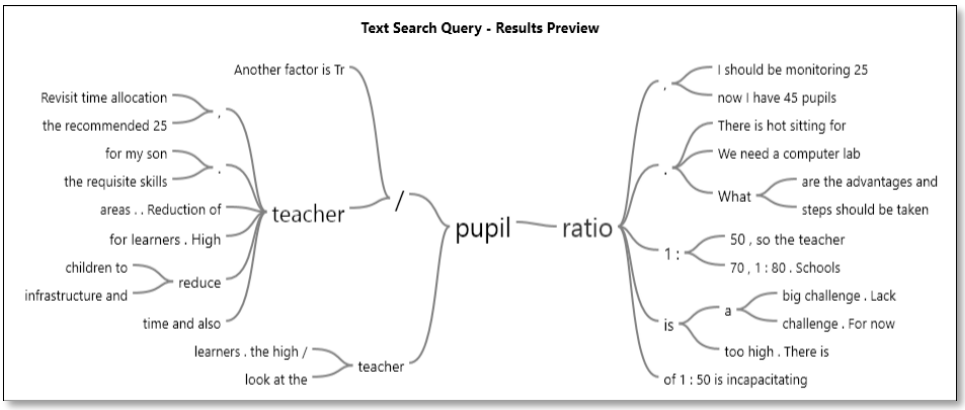

Figure 3.

Teacher to Pupil Ratio, Source: Own compilation from NVivo software

The tree diagram summarises the teachers' responses with regards to teacher -pupil ratio in the schools studied. In Zimbabwean primary schools, the teacher- pupil ratio for ECD classes is above 1:50 contrary to 1:20 stipulated in Director's Circular No. 12 of 2005. An effort should be made to ensure that there is a more equitable distribution of school enrolments so that classes do not become too small to be viable, or too large to be managed. Connected to enrolments are the teachers' pedagogical skills.

It emerged from the responses that the majority of facilitators lacked knowledge in handling the program. TRB2 summarized this as follows: *Facilitators lack sufficient expertise of how to deliver the new ECD program. There is need for them to have more workshops. No learning through play. There is need for learners to have free play. There should be creativity.* Some teachers lacked knowledge of topics, such as, Theatre in VPA. TRA2 further expressed this by saying*: Also, we lack knowledge, for example at this school we do not have a theatre, and learners have no idea of a theatre.* Not much was being done in ICT due to lack of ICT gadgets, electricity, and lack of knowledge on the part of teachers.

Repetition of topics came up as another limitation. TRA1 explained that*: There is repetition of topics in different subjects.* From the teacher's response, the general view is that the content is too much and there is a lot of repetition of topics in different subjects as alluded to earlier on. Topics like Balances, Coordination and Movement are repeated in PE, VPA and Mass Displays. Colours and Shapes are repeated in Mass Displays, Maths/ Science and English. Human body parts are also repeated in many subjects.

Teachers taught the topics individually, as indicated in the subject syllabuses and on the timetable, according to an investigation into this matter of subject integration. We believe that if the syllabuses are correctly aligned, children will have free time on the schedule to play. The fact that teachers complained about issues being repeated shows that they require coaching and mentoring, which is the responsibility of school administrators and TICs. It also demonstrates the teachers' lack of imagination and inventiveness. Teachers, as a result, require extensive hands-on training to master the strategies that can be used successfully, particularly in topic integration. There may be need to revisit the syllabi and ensure the topics are well structured to avoid unnecessary repetition of topics, which is currently evident in the syllabuses and scheme cum plans.

To address the issue of congested timetables and too much subject content, other teachers expressed that they take time from 'less important' subjects to do the ones they deem 'more important as put across by TRD2: Sometimes I take time from *P.E. and I use it for Languages and Maths. The content is too much; it cannot be done in 20 minutes.* This contrasts

with Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory which equally values all subjects. TRC2 thinks that time is adequate but there is need for more time for ICT. Teacher-pupil ratio should be in line with the time allocated so that the teacher can attend to individual children. In this study, the ratios were too high, up to 65/80 pupils per class.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to analyse the implementation of the updated ECD curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools. The article first presented the purpose of education reforms highlighting the rationale of the study. The study determined social validity by identifying the social significant outcomes of the updated ECD curriculum. It then explored the pros and cons that arose during the implementation process defined by the practitioners' views like the competence-based component, child centred approaches etc. However, the implementation of the ECD updated curriculum still has some pertinent disadvantages like, lack of support, lack of learning and teaching materials, enormous teacher: pupil ratio, heavy workload and lack of ICT skills. The paper also exposed how the top-bottom management by Education authorities which lacks consent and consultations can work against good intentions envisaged in the updated curriculum. In general, the quality of ECD is still on the lower side compared to teachers' expectations. The Ministry of Education still needs to collaborate with interested partners in improving access and participation of children to ECD. Additionally, it is critical that quality results of the updated curriculum are also addressed. Practitioners felt that the curriculum was socially relevant although there are strategical gaps to be rectified.

Recommendations

Curriculum blueprints that ignore teachers' welfare are likely to fail. The school must play its crucial role by creating an environment that caters for teachers' and children's needs and interests. Schools in the district lacked proper infrastructure and human resources, in terms of subject specialist teachers. The school and their School Development Committees should spruce up infrastructure and support training of specialist teachers. The members of the school administration should conduct classroom supervision to "catch up" with changes in the system. There is need to organize fundraising programmes to generate money which can be used for seminars and purchase of learning materials.

The environment at any school has a bearing on curriculum implementation. The school community should take an active role in educating children and advocating the adoption of the ECD curriculum in primary schools. They should chip in towards construction and furnishing of ECD classrooms. Schools must provide e-learning to pupils. Communities should support schools with requisite resources.

Limitations of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic was the largest stumbling block declared by WHO, on March 11, 2020, in Zimbabwe. Out of the five sampled primary schools only four participated in the study due to the closure of schools. We did not have enough time to make observations in all selected schools as desired. Time was quite limited. The research participants were equally affected and might have been affected on clearly articulating their expectations. Another challenge was the limited related local research material on the topic. Because only Harare primary schools were involved in the study, the findings may not be applicable to other primary schools in Zimbabwe, but they do provide insight into the kind of challenges that may arise in curriculum implementation throughout the country.

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Appendix 1.

Interview Guide For Practitioners

The researchers will explain to the participants that Mrs H.P. Muzembe is a PhD student at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Dr M.M. Machaba and Dr M.R. Modise are Senior lecturers in the Department of Early Childhood Development at UNISA and are conducting a study on; **Implementing the updated Early Childhood Development curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools: Social Validity Based on Practitioners' Views.** Permission has been sought and granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Provincial Education Directors, District Schools Inspectors, and Heads of schools from EPMAFARA district. Confidentiality will be observed as we review your responses.

Q1. Which factors affect ECD curriculum implementation?
Q2. What are the advantages of the updated ECD curriculum?
Q3. What are the limitations of implementing the updated ECD curriculum?
Q4. What are your expectations in implementing the updated ECD curriculum?
Q5. What are your views on the preparedness of schools regarding this program?
Q6. What are your recommendations on ECD curriculum implementation?