

Unravelling the Narratives of Parents and District Education Officials Regarding Educare in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: The inquiry is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm and is qualitative in nature. The sample comprised of 16 participants, which consisted of 10 parents with children between birth and three years, five each from Mutoko and Murehwa districts and six district education officials, three from each district mentioned. Data generation was through narrative inquiry, document analysis and qualitative questionnaire. Thematic analysis was used to present and analyse the findings. The findings of the study revealed that, despite there being less activity in birth to three educare provisions, parents and education officials were convinced that children could immensely benefit from accessing and participating in the programme. A major finding was that holistic development of children is enhanced through participation in educare and opportunities for early identification and intervention on developmental delays are among other benefits. It was also found that the government of Zimbabwe is facing some challenges regarding educare provisions. Chief among these concerns is lack of a comprehensive early childhood development policy, lack of an approved educare curriculum and infrastructure, among others. Hope is, however, not lost regarding educare provisions. It is believed that the results of the study can lead to a paradigm shift in early childhood development programmes, where the significance of educare can be realised and promoted.

Keywords: Narratives, educare, early childhood care and education, policy, parents

1. INTRODUCTION

The first five years of a child's life journey are very crucial due to the unmatched rapid rate of development that is associated with it. The best legacy to give a child is a strong foundation that will underpin his development in all future endeavours. According to Shonkoff (2009) the child's early years are crucial in laying a solid foundation for future developments. In this regard, a quality educare programme is the answer. The importance of early childhood development should see governments and other key stakeholders working together to provide quality services that will ultimately benefit young children.

The experiences children encounter in educare settings are necessary to build strong foundations for future successes. Learning begins at birth, this makes educare provision more relevant and a necessity to enhance children's development. The experiences children gain early in their life have a lasting impact on their development (Feeney, Christesen, and Moravicik, 2010). Subsequently, countries the world over are making frantic efforts to develop and improve their early childhood development services to accommodate all deserving children.

The provision of educare is one way of ensuring that young children can have a solid base that can enhance their potential in life. Ministry of Women and Child Development: India (2014) states that parents are key stakeholders in early childhood education and care, hence their participation is important. According to Durisic and Bunijevac (2017, p. 144), "parents and families are essential stakeholders and have a major impact on the success of the process of education and upbringing of children." My study sought to unravel the narratives of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe. Thus, it attempted to understand how parents and education officials view educare services in Zimbabwe.

2. BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe is a signatory to different conventions on education. The Zimbabwean government is bound by the Jomtien Education for All (EFA) Framework of Action 1990 and the Dakar Framework for Action 2000 to provide every person, child, youth and adult educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. The government responded to the dictates of these conferences on education by developing a number of early childhood development policies. Notably, the Government of Zimbabwe (2004) instituted Secretary's Circular Number 14 of 2004 which directed that all primary schools, with effect from 2005, were required to attach at least one ECCE class of 4-5 year olds. Again, the government of Zimbabwe (2005) established the Director's Circular number 12 of 2005, which mandated that ECD classes were to be attached at every primary school in phases. Phase one in Section 2.1 focused on the attachment of ECD classes for 4-5-year-olds and this was to be done during the first five years. In phase two, the focus was on the attachment of 3-4-year-olds classes, which was to be achieved in the second five-year programme.

The Government of Zimbabwe (2005) developed another policy framework, Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005, which gave guidelines on the establishment and operation of Early Childhood Development centres in the country. Peculiar in this policy is the age of attendance. Section 9 clearly states that "no child may attend an early childhood development centre before he or she attains the age of three years". However, all the policies have no provisions for birth to three years' children, hence this impact on educare for children in this age category.

In 2015, Zimbabwe was one of the 195 countries that ratified the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 agenda. The agenda has 17 Goals, which participants agreed to implement in their respective countries to better the lives of their people. Amongst these is Goal Number 4 which sought to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015, p. 21). Therefore, governments are compelled to act and spearhead the provision of quality education for all their citizens. Governments were supposed to come up with strategies that would see every child, despite his or her age, disability or gender effectively accessing suitable learning environments. Other countries came up with some strategies and interventions. In Finland, "education facilities provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all" (Statistics Finland, 2020, p. 19). The government of Ghana, came up with different strategies that sought to achieve the SDGs. For example, the Ghana Education Strategic Plan (ECP) (2010-2020) was developed to provide frameworks that would guide goal achievement in the country. In a research study by Mohammed (2017), Ghana sought to provide "quality and child friendly universal basic education for all through various opportunities for all categories of children". Since Goal Number 4 is all encompassing, it means even birth to three educare is provided for. In South Africa, the Education White Paper on Early Childhood Education (2016) was developed. It mandated that all 5-year-old children be enrolled in early childhood development settings (Grade R).

The Department of Statistics South Africa (2019) and the Education White Paper on

Early Childhood Education 2016 "mandated improvements in the quality, curricula and teaching for the categories birth to 4 years old." It is therefore evident that some policy developments regarding birth to four years in South Africa were made in recognition of the SDG Goal Number 4. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed "The Action Plan to 2019: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030 (The government of South Africa, 2019). The policy highlighted what the Department intended to achieve with regards to education provisions at all levels. Unfortunately, not much is available in the Zimbabwean context concerning educare provisions, hence the government as a key stakeholder should come up with strategies to address this existing gap within the current ECD programmes.

2.1. Sub-Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe?
- What are the narratives of parents and district education officials regarding the attachment theory in educare?
- What are the narratives of parents and district education officials regarding the overlapping relationships between school/educare and home?

2.2. Delimitation of the Study

The delimitation of this study was on unravelling the narratives of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe. The study was carried out in Mutoko and Murehwa districts of Mashonaland East province. The choice of the two districts was due to them bordering each other, which made my travelling easy as my residency is in Mutoko. My familiarisation with early childhood development programmes that existed there facilitated my undertaking of this research.

2.3. Limitations

The rurality of the two districts may affect the generalisability of the study findings. Due to my interests and opinions on birth to three provision, I may have been biased and failed to see other existing gaps and this may impact on the findings. In an effort to mitigate on the biases, the data was verified through triangulation. Instead of relying on one source of data (narratives), the researcher corroborated the information that was collected through other data sets such as document analysis and interviews.

2.4. Significance of the Study

Educare seems to be invisible and less accessible in Zimbabwe. The significance of this study is that it may be relevant in bridging existing gaps in educare provisions in Zimbabwe. The narratives of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe can influence policy makers to consider developing a comprehensive ECD policy in future. Implementation strategies of policies can also be influenced by this study.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Successful implementation of educare relies heavily on how parents and district education officials perceive it. It is also buttressed by the nature of policies available. Parents should be concerned with the suitability and relevance of any programme that targets their children. Thus, how they perceive educare is critical to its success. Parents and district education officials' view of educare can either encourage them to embrace the service or discourage them. Ministry of Women and Child Development: India (2014), states that the family is a key component in early childhood service provision and its participation influences a child's care, development and learning. The choices and decisions made with regards to educare depend on how parents and district education officials perceive it. There are many benefits that can be realised through educare. The benefits have seen countries the world over making frantic efforts to establish and improve their early childhood development services. Shonkoff (2009, p. 2) says "cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course." A quality educare programme should be provided so that children can benefit from it. Evidence of what other researchers and writers say regarding educare is the focus of this section.

3.1. Components of Quality Educare

There are a number of components that ensure the quality of educare services available. According to Willoughby (2016, p. 2), "The quality of any early years care and education setting is hugely important for babies and young children, and it is essential that decisions by parents about where their child is cared for and by whom are made with quality, not just practicality and cost, very much in mind." Therefore, parents and district education officials' understanding of the importance of educare will allow for positive decisions.

3.2. A Good Curriculum

The stipulations of early childhood development policies of a country should greatly influence practices. One of the components of quality educare provisions is the availability of a good, suitable and relevant curriculum. Meggitt, Bruce and Manning-

Morton (2016, p. 395) claim that "the best way to prepare children for their adult life is to give them a good childhood that meets their needs and builds on their interests." A curriculum for young children should be play based and seeking to build a strong foundation for their development. If the parents are to have their children in an educare programme, they should have strong convictions that the curriculum offered is relevant and suitable for their children's development. Mohammed (2015) submits that activities and experiences that children encounter in early childhood development

environments such as educare will shape their future. An appropriate educare curriculum greatly impacts on the quality of care young children experience and this ultimately influences their development and future endeavours.

3.3. Effective Parental Involvement

Parents are crucial stakeholders in the early childhood development sector and they have a right to demand quality services for their children. Li-Fen, Moore and Lin (2014) view that it is necessary for parents to consider seriously components such as safe and stimulating environment, a good curriculum, sensitive caregiving practices, teacher qualifications and cultural sensitivity whenever they think of quality ECD provisions. Quality educare programmes should embrace the involvement of parents in its activities. “The bond a child makes with their first attachment figure (parent or other primary caregivers) is the building block for nearly all other important steps in growing up” (Multnomah County Family Court Services, 2014, p. 7). Therefore, the parent or caregiver involvement with the child plays a role in defining future trajectory developments. Parents get involved with their children through a number of ways, for instance they can play games, feed the child or change a diaper. A Ministry of

Education (2011) report cited in Pennell’s (2018, p. 43) states that “partnership with parents is deemed an essential component of quality early childhood education in

Aotearoa New Zealand.” Effective parental involvement thus can greatly contribute to quality educare in Zimbabwe.

3.4. Challenges Regarding Educare

A significant increase in early childhood development has been realised in most countries the world over. This has been due to a number of factors, such as governments’ responses to the Jomtien and Dakar Conferences on Education, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All Goals and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among other aspects. However, most developing countries still face a number of challenges in their early childhood development programmes. Some of the challenges developing countries like Zimbabwe face include, among others, lack of professionally qualified teachers/caregivers, lack of adequate and relevant resources, and the lack of a relevant and suitable curriculum.

3.5. Barriers to Overlapping Relationships between Home and School

Effective relationships between home and school can be hindered by a number of barriers. Relationships between the home and the school are not smooth sailing; there are challenges associated with them. There are a number of barriers that can hinder effective involvement by parents and teachers in educare practices. It is therefore imperative to recognise some of the obstacles that negatively impact on parental participation in early childhood development services. The following are some of the barriers: attitude, educational background, resources-based/logistical barriers and institutional barriers.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative research methodology and interpretivism as its philosophy. The design used was the multi-case design, and the accessible population comprised of all the district officers in the two districts under study. The sample comprised sixteen participants who were purposively selected using criterion sampling. The study’s epistemology was guided by subjectivism and its ontology was guided by constructivism (Cresswell, 2019). The study’s data generation instruments included the interview guide, open-ended questionnaire and focus group discussions. Document analysis was also used to complement the other methods. The interview guide and focus group discussions constituted the data generation methods

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Parents’ Narratives Regarding Educare in Zimbabwe

The study sought to unravel the narratives of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe. Parents, as the key stakeholders in early childhood development, participated in the study through narratives. The parents, as custodians of children, provided first hand data on their perceptions regarding educare in Zimbabwe.

Themes and Categories from Parents' Narratives

Research Question	Themes	Categories
What are the perceptions of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe?	Opportunities in educare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Cognitive development o Social and emotional development o Physical development • Solid foundation for future development • Early identification and intervention
	Challenges identified by parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of educare services • Ineffectiveness of educare • Unaffordable fees • Educare not good for attachment • Lack of policy specifications

5.2. Data Analysis and Interpretation: Parents' Narratives

My research focused on unravelling the narratives of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe. The findings revealed that parents have varied perceptions regarding educare provisions. The data indicated that most of the participating parents, except one, were happy to have their children involved in educare. The parent who expressed ignorance on educare apparently had the youngest child (seven months) and was skeptical about the welfare of her child in an educare setting. Rather, she thought that, as a fulltime house wife, she had ample time to take care of her child. The other nine parents cited the opportunities that children can benefit from if they were to participate in educare programmes. Although parents exhibited a positive attitude on educare provisions, data collected also shows that there are some misconceptions surrounding it. Results from the narratives of parents on their perceptions regarding educare in Zimbabwe had the following theme; opportunities and challenges of educare in Zimbabwe. The theme has two subthemes, the first one is opportunities identified by parents and this has the following categories; holistic development, a solid foundation for future development and early identification and interventions. The second sub-theme is challenges identified by parents and the categories included are lack of educare services, lack of a relevant educare curriculum and misconceptions about educare.

5.3. Foundation for Future Developments

The perceptions of parents show that they would be comfortable to have their children participate in educare settings since there are a lot of opportunities for their children's development. Of note is that educare participation is important in laying a solid foundation for future developments. The participants presented that a solid base laid early in children's life is key to them reaching their full potential. For example, Participant P1 expressed that;

“In educare, the child will be introduced to teaching and learning at a tender age which would prepare his/her learning and development life journey.”

In agreement, P8 voiced that;

“A strong foundation that may lead to better performance later in life is laid in the early years.”
P9 added that;

“Educare provisions lays a solid base from which all future developments anchor on.”

Participation in educare lays a solid foundation for later life successes. The experiences that children encounter during their participation in educare programmes have the potential to shape their future. In educare settings, the foundation for future developments is laid when children “feel accepted, develop attachments and trust their caregivers” (Australian Government: Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 23). Through participation in educare, the probability is that young children develop positive attitudes towards life. Yoshikawa and Kabay (2015) put forward that the experiences

of children in ECD programmes such as educare, the home, nursery schools, preschools and in the communities interact with the genes to shape their development. In educare, children engage with peers and caregivers, something that is key in developing positive relationships which are critically important in helping them to acclimatise and get used to scheduled and organised experiences later in life.

5.4. Narratives of District Education Officials

The Early Childhood Development programme in Zimbabwe is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE). The involvement of education officials in this study is due to the fact that they are at the policy development level. Their involvement with other education stakeholders may potentially improve the researched setting. As rich informants in this study, six district education officials completed qualitative questionnaires in an effort to find out about educare in Zimbabwe. The themes, sub-themes and categories are indicated in the table below;

Table1.1. Themes and categories from district education officials

Research Question	Theme	Categories
What are the perceptions of parents and district education officials regarding educare in Zimbabwe?	Opportunities in educare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Cognitive development o Social and emotional development o Physical development
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early literacy skills development
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brain development
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solid foundation for future developments
	Challenges identified by district education officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortage of educare centres • No comprehensive early childhood development Policy
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of an approved educare curriculum
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of monitoring systems
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding

Opportunities identified by district education officials Evidence from the collected data revealed that education officials have no qualms about having their children or grandchildren participate in educare settings. Opportunities that could benefit young children were cited as the main reasons for their stance. Therefore, when education officials have a positive attitude towards educare provision, then this is a boost for the sector as they are at the policy development level.

5.5. Holistic Development

Findings from the qualitative questionnaire by district education officials revealed that there are opportunities for holistic development abundant in educare provision. The participants agreed that they would have their children or grandchildren in educare centres for the benefits it has for young children’s development. For instance;

EO4 explained that;

“Educare is a special programme that takes children three years and below aboard and it has a component of education and care in it. Participation in educare promotes physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.” EO5 added that;

“I regard the provisions of educare to be a step in the right direction since children will be given a good footing in their early life. There are opportunities for holistic development to take place.” EO2 weighed in by stating that;

“Educare is a very important programme that is meant for the holistic development and proper care of children birth to three years.”

Holistic development entails the total development of a child in all domains. As such, the following sub categories were looked at; cognitive development, socio-emotional and physical development.

5.6. Cognitive Development

Educare settings should aim at providing children with opportunities and experiences that will enhance the development of their cognitive domain fully.

EO3 stated that;

“Educare is an initiative that provides comprehensive and coordinated services for children in the birth to three age range categories and is crucial for children’s cognitive development.”

In agreement, EO4 explained that;

“Educare is a special programme that takes children three years and below aboard and it has a component of education and care in it. Participation in educare promotes physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.”

The early childhood years are a sensitive period where children’s exposure to quality services is important. World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020) believes that it is a human right and essential requisite that young children should achieve their developmental potential (see section 2.2.1). As such, it would be prudent for all young children to have access to educare settings so they could benefit from the opportunities available there towards their cognitive development. Educare environments should be designed in ways that enhance cognitive development.

Maduewesi (1999) and Ogunyemi (2002) cited in Sakineh (2012) highlighted that “It is highly desirable that young children are given the opportunity to spend some hours in pre-school settings with many facilities and qualified staff to enrich and stimulate them socially and intellectually.” It therefore means that educare centres should have developmentally appropriate materials. These should lead young children to solve problems, be creative and discover things by themselves. Opportunities availed to young children with regards to cognitive development warrants increased participation in educare by more children. Therefore, investments in educare should be prioritised.

5.7. Social and Emotional Development

The educare programmes have been found to be ideal for the development of social and emotional skills. This emerged from the analysed data collected through qualitative questionnaire of the district education officials. It was found that even though there is very limited activity pertaining to educare in Zimbabwe, the programme has great opportunities that can enhance the development children’s social and emotional skills.

Below are some of the excerpts from the education officials’ interviews.

EO1 elucidated that;

“Educare is a fundamental programme that brings a variety of benefits to young children. It helps parents to understand the crucial needs of children from birth to three years. It can play a part in the development of social and emotional skills in young children.”

In addition, EO2 clarified that;

“In educare programmes, children interact with both the physical and social environments. Educare provision has the potential to help children develop their socio-emotional skills as children can interact and share experiences.”

EO4 expounded that;

“Educare participation can promote socio-emotional development in young children. Children develop independence, cooperation, sympathy, empathy and other important skills.”

EO5 and EO6 agreed that surely there are opportunities to develop socio-emotional skills in young children. They forwarded that;

“In educare, the development of all domains is enhanced. Children develop socioemotional skills through interacting with their environment in educare settings.”

The findings indicate that participation in educare settings has the potential to aid social and emotional development in young children. By having a materially rich environment where young children can freely engage and interact, social and emotional skills can be developed. Educare settings can engage young children in play activities as pairs or groups with other children. This exposes young children to many play opportunities, something that is important in their development. The availability of knowledgeable caregivers who can create positive relationships with children in educare settings is very crucial then. Gonzalez-Mena (2014) put forward that young children need plenty of warm interactions that are respectful, sensitive and responsive. Caregivers should be able to build healthy relationships with children so they can develop healthy social and emotional skills (see section 2.2.1.3). Through participation in educare, young children develop the ability to communicate as well as regulate their emotional dispositions. Crowley and Wheeler (2014) assert that children who participate in quality early childhood development environments are more socially well off than their counterparts who do not have such opportunities. In these environments, they interact with their age mates as well as adults who takes good care of them. Such conditions are rich and vital for social and emotional skills development.

Thus, educare provision can be supportive in young children’s development of social and emotional competencies. The findings call for caregivers who can create positive environments that are conducive for children to share and express their feelings freely.

5.8. Physical Development

Educare enhances children’s physical development. The data from the education officials’ qualitative questionnaires revealed that educare provision can play a significant role in young children’s physical development. The interviewees highlighted the following.

EO2 explained that;

“Educare is a very important programme that can enhance holistic development and proper care of children birth to three years. Opportunities for physical development are evident through the provision of adequate equipment and materials for use by young children.” Participant EO3 added that;

“The child benefits immensely in educare, for example cognitive and physical skills development are enhanced”. EO5 was of the view that;

“Physical development is enhanced in through interactions made by the child in his or her environment.” EO6 put forward that;

“Educare presents learning opportunities to children early in their life. Children develop physical skills as they engage in running, jumping, building blocks or pushing and pulling materials abundant in educare settings.”

My analysis of the questionnaire data clearly shows that education officials were convinced that educare provision plays a major role on physical development. According to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (Ghana) (2018), physical development entails how young children’s bodies grow, change and develop. The suggested activities by EO6 are ideal for physical skills development. As such, educare settings should strive to provide age-appropriate materials and equipment suitable for physical skills development of young children. Educare settings should have relevant and suitable play materials and equipment that will be used by children frequently. These are crucial in the development of the physical domain as children push, pull, or climb on some of them. These activities thereby enhance the development of physical skills (see section 2.2.1.2). In educare settings, the environment should be well organised and stimulating so that infants and toddlers can freely play and interact in a way that enhances their physical development.

6. CONCLUSION

Increases in accessibility and availability of educare services is long overdue. Yes, available policies have done wonders in increasing access to ECD services for 3-5 years’ children; however, a gap still exists where educare is not catered for. It is important to build on this success and advocate for the

improvement of such. The study concluded that there is need for a comprehensive and all-encompassing ECD policy in Zimbabwe. The policy should provide guidelines on educare provisions as well. A unified early childhood development programme is hereby advocated. There is need for a well-structured and coordinated multi-sectoral approach to ECD provisions, where services are not fragmented as in the current scenario. Line ministries should play complementary roles so that children 's holistic development is achieved. To achieve this, funding has to be available. The government and other developmental partners have to work together in sourcing funding and monitoring that it has been put to good use in developing educare service provision.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the reviewed literature and the empirical findings, it is important that a concerted effort be made regarding educare availability and accessibility in Zimbabwe. The value of educare provision on children's development is so immense. It can therefore not be ignored so there is need for some strategies to be proffered to increase visibility and availability of and accessibility to these important services. Since the narratives of parents emphasise the need for educare facilities in Zimbabwe, it has become essential to have a framework to promote effective educare in Zimbabwe.

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