

## Early Childhood Teaching and Learning in Zimbabwe – A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

*The main aim of this article was to critically examine Early Childhood Education (ECD) teaching and learning provision in Zimbabwe, with the challenges and successes thereof. The approaches and focus of early learning education and provision during the three different epochs of Zimbabwe's history, which are pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial were analysed. The study used a qualitative research methodology based on document analysis and further employed historical research design to obtain data on the evolution of Early Childhood Education in Zimbabwe. The challenges and success of post-independence Early Childhood Education were presented and recommendations were given.*

### Key Words

Early Childhood Education, Pre-colonial, Indigenous, Wisdom traditions, Colonial, Post-independence

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## 1.0 Introduction

The article focuses on a qualitative critical analysis on the provision of Early Childhood Education in Zimbabwe from pre-colonial to colonial period, ending with the provision of post-independence initiatives. Since ancient times Early Childhood Education has been recognised as critical to the child's cognitive and social development. Empirical research on human brain development has also shown that during early childhood years the human brain develops rapidly. Research has further shown that during this period the brain is most malleable and highly impressionable<sup>13</sup>. Cognitive development theorists like Piaget (1936: Vygotsky (1962) and many others have also similarly established that the experiences a child is exposed to in early childhood affect brain development and impacts on their brain functioning, hence influencing future learning abilities. Educational psychologists have also weighed in by adding that the early childhood period provides a critical window of opportunity for language, cognition, vision and social emotional development when the child is still able to learn and acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes very quickly with minimal efforts (Thorndike 1927; Freud 1923). Child psychologists (ibid) have also noted that early childhood is an opportune period of socialisation, where nurturing the character of a child and inculcating social norms, values and habits are easy.

Zimbabwean families have generally viewed Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a vehicle for the long-term eradication of poverty for the poor, where their children are thought to be given an equal opportunity of improving the chances of success at school. It has also been argued that ECE promotes primary school readiness and increases cost efficiency, which reduces grade repetition and dropout rates and ultimately leads to greater success in school. Furthermore, it has been argued that if ECD programmes are well managed with sound national enforcement strategies in place, they foster learning and encourage school attendance in children <sup>14</sup>.

It is against the foregoing background that this study sought to analyse the development and importance attached to the provision of Early Childhood Education in Zimbabwe. The analysis starts off by analysing the contributions of indigenous (pre

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<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, 2018; Dipietro 2000

<sup>14</sup> Young, 2002; UNESCO, 1996

– colonial) teaching and learning philosophies and practices on early learning education in Zimbabwe. It then moves on to the colonial period and then lastly, post-independence realities.

## **2.0 Methodology**

The research design chosen for this study was the historical research methodology. Historical research design was found appropriate because of the nature of the research which was qualitatively analysing the provision of early childhood education during three different historical epochs of Zimbabwe. Adlin (2023) states that historical research is a specific type of qualitative research which provides the author with the ability to gain meaningful insights from the past, and the possibility of looking at the past to make predictions about the future. Historical research categorises sources of information or data as primary, secondary, or tertiary. The originality of the information and its proximity to the source determine whether data is classified as primary, secondary, or tertiary. In turn, the reader can determine whether reported information is first or second hand. The latter obtains when information used simply conveys experiences and opinions of others<sup>15</sup>.

## **3.0 Early Childhood Teaching and Learning in Pre-colonial Zimbabwe**

The education system in Zimbabwe has been influenced by several ideological, political, historical, social, cultural, economic, as well as environmental factors. The 90 years of colonial rule that ended with independence in 1980 left legacies which have had enduring impact on the nature and orientation of the education system of Zimbabwe. Not much has been written about Indigenous forms of early childhood teaching and learning in pre-colonial Zimbabwe because of the colonial agenda which deliberately targeted the indigenous pre-colonial forms of education for eradication and extinction by regarding them as 'primitive and backward'.

In pre-colonial Africa, Zimbabwe included, education was viewed as a way of passing down a community's accumulated knowledge to the next generation for smooth transition into adult roles and, ultimately, ensure offspring and community survival and continuity. In short, education in traditional Africa was practical, purposeful and

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<sup>15</sup> Jovita, J. Tan 2015

functional. It taught the young how to manage their environment and imparted critical survival skills, including farming, hunting, fishing, food preparation and preservation, and how to construct dwellings and run homes<sup>16</sup>.

The principal methods used to process and propagate knowledge production, acquisition and dissemination were dialogue and collaboration. The acquisition of knowledge required learners to be embedded in their communities where they attained essential skills and socialised as active participants. Hence, from this perspective, learning was conceived as a form of social interaction taking place within a context where active participation was essential for effective acquisition of knowledge, mores and vocational skills required for learners towards community development<sup>17</sup>. The education of children was a community affair. The child belonged to the whole community and thus, every adult was responsible over the socialisation of the child, passing on practices, mores and values to the children.

Apart from passing on knowledge in these 'on the job' training ways, the Africans also had a wisdom tradition which passed relevant education to the young through proverbs, idioms, rituals, beliefs, mythical folktales and folksongs, community work songs, poetry, art symbols as well as many other informal ways of educating<sup>18</sup>.

Okpewo (1985) observed that the narration of stories must have been one of the peak achievements in the development of communication in non-literate societies in Africa. Using the 'wit' of the narrative genius and the vitality of the songs of the group, folktales spoke directly to and advised the community. These were pivotal in the socio-economic induction of the young and impart important values of holding the community together.

In most of the indigenous communities, teaching and learning were informed by the environment in such a way that the learning process became directly linked to the nature and pattern of work in the society. Rodney (1983:375), cites a good example of children from the Bemba community who "by the age of six could name fifty to sixty species of tree plants without hesitation, but they knew very little about ornamental flowers ..." The young children were able to name the trees because knowledge of

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<sup>16</sup> Nhundu, 1995

<sup>17</sup> Lauzon, 1999

<sup>18</sup> Nhundu, 1995; Matsika, 2014

trees was a necessity in an agricultural community that often-employed slash-and-burn techniques.

In Zimbabwe, Christian missionary learning institutions acted in cohorts with British formal education to deliberately undermine and debase the wisdom traditions and indigenous ways and purposes of education through cultural imperialism, thereby despising and repudiating the values of the colonised and undermining their cultures. These cultural strategies employed by colonisers were subtle and more effective than overt forms of colonial control and subjugation, such as policing and the legal system because they fostered inferiority complex in the colonised while, inadvertently, embracing Eurocentric ways of being<sup>19</sup>.

### **3.1 Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) in Colonial Zimbabwe**

As attested above, the colonial education system was used by the white minority population as a tool of domination and to systematically subjugate the majority African population and deprive them of their right to education. In Zimbabwe and elsewhere, the history of colonised was shaped through *social abjection*<sup>20</sup>. There was a deliberate early childhood pedagogy that was designed to accomplish both theoretical and practical disconnection of African child from the world of life.

Christian missionary education institutions colluded with British formal education and change the purpose of education by using cultural technologies of domination which created social discontinuities. These strategies made school knowledge accessible only to neophytes and focused on the provision of literary training, teaching of crafts, agriculture, and some semblance of technical training to meet extant labour needs of the colonial administration<sup>21</sup>. Wa Thiong'o (1986) and Achebe (2000) add that one of the main objectives of colonialism, especially via its Christian missionary institutions of education, was to destroy as much as possible the psycho-cultural being of the Africans.

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<sup>19</sup> Kallaway, 1984

<sup>20</sup> "Social abjection" is associated with a process where exclusion is elected as a way of constituting power for the sole benefit of the elite or ruling class.

<sup>21</sup> Kallaway, 1984; Lugard, 1922

Abdi (2012) concurs with the arguments above by positing that the discontinuities and annihilation of the psycho-cultural being of Africans, which resulted in the production of social abjection during Zimbabwe's colonial period (1890–1980) were to ensure that schools served as a key means of Christian conversion. Accordingly, colonial education was supposedly designed to help the colonized by bringing 'light' and 'civility' to perceived 'barbaric' communities. From early learning onwards, Christian missionary was designed to foster the belief that the African learner's lifeworld was myopic and superstitious. Upon the implanting and taking root of this belief, the colonial school became a space and tool for deliberate social uprooting of the African child<sup>22</sup>.

Abdi (2009) further noted that the process of colonialism saw indigenous ways of learning rooted in the cultural history of practice of oral societies being regarded as stagnated in the past and lacking innovative alternatives that would make them attractive and acceptable in the new modalities of colonial relationships. The principal objectives of colonial pedagogy cultural dislodgment, othering, epistemological domination, and implanting mediocrity in the African child<sup>23</sup>.

In later schooling, Rodney (1983:380) described the colonial schooling system as an "education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment". The situation, according to Marechera (1980), was made worse by the fact that the social abjection that learners experienced emerged as a manifestation of the overbearing hegemonic relations, narratives, and institutions of late modernity that were brought into Zimbabwe by British imperial colonial rule—and were decided for the learners in their absence.

By the 1970s the Rhodesian government had been employing Black women as domestic workers. Some of whom had young children. In response to the need for childcare for these increasing numbers of children and free their parents for domestic work, the government made deliberate attempts to establish early learning programmes under two sets of colonial government regulations. The first was the Child

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<sup>22</sup> Ngugi wa Thiongo, 1986

<sup>23</sup> Shizha & Kariwo, 2011; Terreblanche, 2014

Protection and Adoption Regulations of 1972 which made provision for the establishment of Early Childhood Education in the form of nursery schools, pre-schools, and crèches. The Ministry of Education was not linked to these Early Learning centres for the African children and there was no deliberate educational dimension since the provision was not guided by a curriculum<sup>24</sup>.

However, the Child Protection and Adoption Regulations of 1972 only served a paediatric function compared to the Nursery School regulations of 1973 which were established for White children and provided them with significant early learning advantages. For example, while the 1972 regulations for Black education served a paediatric function, the 1973 regulations for White education served a pedagogic function, which promoted and buttressed social and economic racial divide by providing White children with a solid foundation for their future development<sup>25</sup>.

### **3.2 Early Childhood Development in Post-independence Zimbabwe**

#### **3.2.1 Focus on Equality**

Pursuant to the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe educational provision emerged as the most urgent Government strategy to address the inherited socio-economic inequalities which had favoured the minority White population<sup>26</sup>. Inequalities of education and land distribution had been the two most compelling reasons for the many youths who left to fight in the war of Zimbabwe's liberation. In recognition of these war rallying issues for the majority Black population, the newly independent Zimbabwe government in 1980 declared education as a basic human right. It regarded education as one of the vital strategies not only to redress the racial imbalances that existed, but also to achieve scientific and industrial progress. Emphasis was placed on the provision of infrastructure for schools and health services in geographical areas and among social groups that had been marginalized throughout the colonial era<sup>27</sup>.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) was declared a basic human right, just like all the other forms of education in Zimbabwe, leading to a mushrooming of private Early

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<sup>24</sup> Nhundu and Chung, (forthcoming)

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Nhundu and Chung, (forthcoming)

Learning Centres. But the real transformation in Early Learning commenced in 1982 following the repeal of the 1972 Child Protection and Adoption Regulations and the Nursery School Regulations of 1973<sup>28</sup>. It is worth noting that the new Early Learning regulations were introduced by the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs and not the Ministry of Education.

The mushrooming of early learning centres was mainly in the urban area, 4000 of them were registered that year<sup>29</sup>. These Early Learning Centres were known by various names like crèches, nursery schools, day care centres, kindergartens and pre-schools and served children three years old or less. Most of these urban Early Learning Centres were private and had children from working parents who saw them as a relief strategy since taking up employment when the socioeconomic tide had opened to Blacks. In rural areas, on the other hand, Early Learning Centres were community-based programmes provided by local communities, which built and furnished the centres, paid teachers, and also provided equipment and contributed to infrastructure development. Since most of the communities were poor, most of these centres operated under trees and were run by untrained staff<sup>30</sup>.

In 1988, the provision of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Zimbabwe was significantly enhanced when it was transferred from the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs to the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education<sup>31</sup>. This did not only mean that ECE now operated under a new Ministry, but more significantly, it was Government acknowledgement that Early Learning and care was indeed integral to the formal education system. Following the migration, the Ministry of Education soon developed a policy framework that guided the operations of Early Childhood Education Centres run by a hotch-potch of stakeholders, including private providers, NGOs, church groups local communities and quasi state institutions such as urban and rural councils and governing authorities.

The downside to the above caretaker approach to early childhood education was that it operated informally without a curriculum until 2004 when an Early Childhood Development (ECD) curriculum was adopted following the recommendations of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Education, 2006

<sup>29</sup> Nhundu and Chung, (forthcoming)

<sup>30</sup> Samkange, 2016

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Education, 2006



1999 Nziramasanga Commission, which had observed that a majority of children, especially those from rural and poor areas had no access to early learning. Therefore, the Commission recommended the introduction of universal early learning programmes to increase access and provide every child equal opportunity. Accordingly, the Commission argued that Early Childhood Development Education should serve as a foundation on which to anchor basic national principles and philosophy of Zimbabwe<sup>32</sup>.

The 2004 policy which was then known as the National Early Childhood Development (NECD) Policy offered guidelines for the implementation of Early Childhood Development services as recommended by the Nziramasanga Commission. According to the NECD Policy, ECD was considered an integral part of the formal primary education system and, hence, made it mandatory for public primary schools to provide an annex of at least one ECD-B class catering for 4- to 5-year-olds from 2005. The policy also mandated schools to attach an additional class, ECD-A for children aged between 3 and 4 years beginning 2006. The current provision mandates all primary schools to provide ECD A and B, so that children are eligible to continue to the Grade 1 primary school level on completion of ECD B<sup>33</sup>.

#### 4.0 Challenges

The main educational goal of post-independence Zimbabwe was to provide uninhibited opportunities to all children to an inclusive education regardless of colour, age, disability or creed. In this, the government had great success as exemplified in massive quantitative growth depicted in the following statistics.

#### Pre- and Post-Independence Enrolment in Educational Institutions

	1974	1979	1981	1983
<b>Primary</b>	836,500	892,651	1,680,143	2,164,118
<b>Secondary</b>	66,458	72,335	144,735	188,467
<b>College</b>	933	1,617	2,525	3,255

<sup>32</sup> Nziramasanga, 1999

<sup>33</sup> MoPSE, 2023

<b>Total</b>	903,891	966,603	1,827,403	2,355,840
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Source: Government of Zimbabwe, "Monthly Digest "Parliamentary Debates," August 3, 1983

Nevertheless, although there was equality of opportunity to attend school, there was no equality regarding access to the same quality of education, though so freely provided to the formerly education-starved Black masses. Albeit the advent of Independence and the promulgation of the new policy on access to education, the colonial era legacy of racial inequality simply transformed to even a wider divide between social classes and between urban and rural children. While some Black families had moved into former white residential areas and were now accessing privileged former white schools with superior learning facilities and infrastructure, while the majority remained in overcrowded schools in poor urban neighbourhoods and rural communities<sup>34</sup>.

In regard to Early Childhood Education, although the Ministry of Education had given much of the needed focus to it before the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission, the ECD programme has had drawbacks from many challenges which include, but are not limited to, lack of uniform curriculum, vague policy models, inadequate facilities and resources, inability to retain qualified teachers and many others.<sup>35</sup>

#### **4.1 Shortage of ECD Teachers**

The post-independence massive expansion of education in Zimbabwe was done without giving due regard to the corresponding availability of teachers. The shortage of qualified early childhood education teachers was worse than that of the other sectors of the education system, yet the government of Zimbabwe had instituted the Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC) model of teacher education to fast track the provision of trained teachers. There were no such corresponding initiatives for ECD teacher education. Most of the ECD centres were run with teachers who neither had training nor the necessary professional early

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<sup>34</sup> Ndlovu, 2013

<sup>35</sup> Nhundu and Chung, (forthcoming)

learning experience. According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) most teachers in early childhood education classes are still paraprofessionals or primary school teachers who have not been trained to cater for the development of toddlers and preschoolers. In most cases, these teachers face the challenge of large classes of children with diverse needs (MoPSE, 2023).

#### **4.2 Curriculum Challenges**

ECD centres which continued to multiply in numbers in Zimbabwe since 2004 have mostly been privately owned and lacked uniform curriculum. The UNESCO (2006) country report observed that although the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture, championed the development of ECD programmes, it was only able to provide a policy framework that guided the operations of ECD centres which were predominantly run by diverse stakeholders outside the Ministry. When an Early Learning Module was later provided for by MoPSE, the untrained and paraprofessional ECD teachers were and are still faced with overcrowded classrooms (MoPSE, 2023).

MoPSE has provided learning areas for ECD curriculum guidance, but the chosen learning areas are still lopsided towards the production of academics as emphasis is still theory based and less on practical and innovative skills.

#### **4.3 Funding and Resources**

The Education Act of 1987 was amended in 1991 because of prevailing adverse socio-economic environment. The amendment further introduced school fees at the primary school level, which had been tuition-free since independence. The reversal of the principle of free and compulsory primary education introduced by the 1987 Act had adverse consequences on access to ECE for poorer families that were forced to keep the younger children playing at home and allow their older siblings to attend school.

Apart from challenges which came with the Amendments, the employment in ECE of untrained teachers and paraprofessionals and the failure to provide teachers with prerequisite tools and learning resources compounded problems for the implementation of early learning programmes. According to Bukaliya R and Mubika A (2012), teachers have the capacity to nurture and support the development of young children and to fully implement the early learning curriculum, provided funding and resources for early

learning are available. Important factors which contribute to the successful implementation of early learning programmes include learning resources and materials, teacher training and staff development, feeding and monitoring and evaluation of Early Learning programmes. For disabled children, UNESCO (2018) further notes that they require access to additional learning opportunities and/or specialized services that are costly and unaffordable to many schools and ECD education providers.

Several studies conducted in Zimbabwe have singled out lack of resources as a key factor that hinders progress toward the successful implementation of the ECD programme<sup>36</sup>. These findings have not been assuaged by the Nziramasanga Commission's Report which recommended cooperation between government and local communities as a strategy to enhance ECD implementation by providing adequate facilities and resources for ECD education. Despite the envisaged cooperation, there are still inadequate and inappropriate classrooms and furniture for use by the ECD A and B pupils who are learning in classes attached to existing traditional primary schools.

Disappointingly, one of the austerity measures announced by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development in the 2018 budget statement was to reduce funding for ECD. Simultaneously the plight of early childhood learners was also worsened by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic which saw a lot of workers being laid off during lockdowns, the economic situation deteriorating and high inflation worsening. This situation has resulted in increasingly widespread poverty and has left many children vulnerable and out of school, especially ECD children`.

#### **4.4 Accessibility**

Many researchers have cited accessibility as one of the factors that hinder the ability of young children to access ECD programmes, especially the poor and those living with disabilities. Key factors revealed include inappropriate infrastructure, environmental setup, distance travelled, appropriateness of equipment and furniture,

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<sup>36</sup> These studies include those by Magwaya et al. (2016), Samkange (2017), Chikwiri and Musiyiwa (2017) and Moyo et al. (2012)

and affordability in terms of cost<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, the findings of the Nziramasanga (1999) Commission revealed that most young children in Zimbabwe, particularly those in rural, remote and poor areas could not access ECD services because of some of the same hindrances.

While the Director's Circular Minute Number 12, 2005 and the Annual Statistical Report of 2012 addressed the distance factor by directing that no children should walk more than 5km to school, a study by Chikwiri and Musiyiwa (2017) revealed that many ECD children in rural areas of Zimbabwe still walk far longer distances than the stipulated 5km. Some walk as much as 6km to 20km one way.

## 5.0 Conclusions

Early Childhood and the ECD A and B programmes in Zimbabwe have had positive impact on the education system amid a plethora of challenges that are still being faced. Below are some of the successes:

- i. Children who attend ECD classes adapt easily to classroom procedures and learn with greater ease.
- ii. There has been a noticed improved pass rate in subsequent grades.
- iii. Pupils who have attended ECD adapt to classroom procedures quickly since they would have been exposed to some of the procedures during ECD A
- iv. There has been a reduced educational expenditure because of little or no need for remedial action.
- v. The introduction of the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) project in 2000 as a demand led initiative provided financial grants to communities to keep vulnerable children in school.
- vi. BEAM support has improved access to early learning by vulnerable children and those with disabilities. Such early learning opportunities have become a tool for the promotion of social equity and inclusion<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Bukaliya, 2012; Sibanda, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> MoPSE 2023

## **6.0 Recommendations**

- MoPSE must consider developing National Early Learning Standards for all early learning teaching and learning providers and put in place enforcement strategies.
- There is urgent need to improve the provision of and access to quality ECD teaching and learning which has been adversely affected by high teacher-pupil ratio and unavailability of adequate human, material, and financial resources.
- Provide adequate and qualified teachers who have essential skills in early learning.
- Provide continuous review of the teacher education curriculum and teacher support.
- Enforce provision of age-appropriate infrastructure, play spaces, learning materials and equipment by all providers.
- Provide for special needs by timely assessment and appropriate placement of learners with disabilities.
- Integrate 21st century skills, e-learning, digital and financial literacy in the early learning curriculum which are in line with Vision 2030.
- The ECD curriculum must include learning areas which teach children productive and entrepreneurial skills.
- Prioritise on technologically driven science education for ECD teachers in their training.
- Enforce diversity and inclusivity in early learning institutions.
- Increase rural and poor community ECD centres to meet the 2 kilometres radius requirement.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

This article has argued that ECD education provision and implementation has been nationally embraced as an indispensable tool for quality education in Zimbabwe. It is evident that while the challenges mitigating against access to quality early childhood education in Zimbabwe today are many and varied, the willingness on the part of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) to fight on is commendable.

But zeal alone is not enough, more still needs to be done if early childhood education is to meet the envisioned standards of Vision 2030.

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