

Attitudes of Primary School Teachers towards Early Childhood Development in Zimbabwean Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT: *This study explored the attitudes of Zimbabwean primary school teachers towards the recently introduced Early Childhood Development (ECD) A and B classes, with the ultimate goal of assessing the acceptability, or otherwise, of the ECD. The survey research design was used to source data from 200 teachers comprising 100 infant and 100 junior teachers recruited from urban and rural primary schools. Overall, the study established that the majority of teachers (60%) in the study sample had a positive attitude towards the introduction of the ECD classes. There was no significant difference between rural and urban teachers but between infant and junior teachers. All in all, in the present writers' view, the research outcomes from this study, indeed, hold promise for the ECD and tentatively provide mandate to the Zimbabwean government to go ahead with the idea of the ECD A and B classes. Based on these findings, the study strongly recommended that the Zimbabwean government should ensure that both human and material resources for the ECD classes are put in place urgently to capture, maintain, and increase the enthusiasm generated by its introduction.*

KEY WORDS: *The attitudes, Zimbabwean primary school teachers, Early Childhood Development, and assessing the acceptability.*

Introduction

This study investigated the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the introduction of Early Childhood Development (ECD) A and B classes in Zimbabwean primary schools. Investigating teachers' attitudes was necessary given that many governments, especially in developing countries, have introduced some changes or new ideas into their education systems only to abandon them later after either meeting resistance from the consumers or realizing that the changes are not feasible. Thus, changes not be guided by research usually fail and are costly to governments in terms of both time and money since the governments may be "forced" to revert to the old system. It is with this in mind that the present

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investigators felt it necessary to conduct this study just as the ECD is being introduced in order to assess its acceptability or otherwise. To this extent, the present study, being to the writers' knowledge, the first attempt, takes lofty significance.

Exploring the teachers' attitudes is critical in that attitudes influence the way we perceive and judge issues since they involve our beliefs, convictions, desires, hopes, feelings, opinions, sentiments and wishes about what things must be and ought to be (Fishbein, 1975; Rajceki, 1982; and Mushoriwa, 1998). This implies that human behaviour, actions, and commitment to issues are greatly influenced by their attitudes towards those issues. One of the fundamental assumptions by the writers is that the attitudes which teachers have towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes greatly influence not only the extent to which they accept the idea, but also their commitment to the implementation of the idea/ programme. In the final analysis, the teachers' attitudes would tend to determine the kind of psychological and material support they give to the programme; hence, its success or failure.

E.F. Ziegler and S. Styfco (1996) underscored that any educational programme that excludes the attitudes of parents and teachers cuts its potential benefits to non-significance. This indicates that if schools are to succeed in their endeavours, changes or innovations, they badly need mandate from key stakeholders such as teachers and parents. It is for this reason that a study of this nature receives justification. Such a study is indeed necessary for monitoring and evaluating the extent of acceptability of this programme.

The Concept of Early Childhood Development, its Background, and Literature Review

The concept of ECD A and B classes was necessitated by the need to avail pre-school education to all children in Zimbabwe as recommended by the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education (Nziramasanga, 1999). Pursuant to the attainment of this goal, a policy decision was taken by the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Culture (MOESC) as indicated in the Secretary's Circular No.14/2004, for primary schools to attach two ECD classes (Grades A and B) in phases, with effect from 2005. According to the Zimbabwe MOESC Director's Circular Number 12 of 2005, the class of 4 – 5 year olds will be known as ECD B and the class of 3 – 4 year olds constitutes the ECD A class. The present study is concerned with the 4 – 5 year olds who are just about to commence Grade 1.

Large volumes of literature, for example C. Dyanda (1999); the Zimbabwe MOESC (2001); UNICEF (2000 and 2002); and L.B.L. Freitas, T.L. Shelton and J.R.H. Tudge (2008) have been documented about early childhood development and education in Zimbabwe and, of course, elsewhere. Most of this literature indicates that recent years have seen serious efforts by the Zimbabwean government, working in collaboration with non-governmental organizations such as UNICEF (United

Nations for International Children, Education, and Funds) to make early childhood development and education more formalized. This drive, which is intended to make early childhood development and education part of the primary school (ECD A and B classes) education system, has a lot of implications to schools and their teachers, especially in these initial stages as regards things such as teaching, human and material resources, relevance of the ECD, and so forth.

Although almost all primary schools have already effected the programme, the present writers assumed that most of the teachers may not be valuing this programme and, therefore, do not see the need for it. Furthermore, a number of schools grapple with problems of lack of qualified personnel, lack of knowledge about what to teach, high teacher-pupil ratios, and so on. For this reason, the present study assumed that most teachers have a negative attitude towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes.

Research also indicates that many parents are willing to invest in pre-school education for various reasons such as *preparing their children for the demands of formal schooling* (Pagani *et al.*, 2003; and Freitas, Shelton & Tudge, 2008); *finding somewhere to leave their children while they go to work* (Hoffman, 1989; and Pagani *et al.*, 1997); and *the thinking that children without this early preparation are more at risk for academic failure* (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; and Wenner, 2009). However, while some researchers have failed to establish any effects of pre-schooling on children's performance at entry into school, others such as E.F. Zigler (1987); V. Lee, J. Brooks-Gunn and E. Schnur (1988); C. Webster-Stratton (1998), and the Scottish Government (2008) have observed short-term cognitive gains which, in most cases, eventually fade. On the other hand, researchers such as I. Lazar and R. Darlington (1982); V. Lee, J. Brooks-Gunn and E. Schnur (1988); D.R. Entwisle and K.L. Alexander (1996); and K.K. Fujisawa, N. Kutsukake and T. Hasegawa (2009) have found long-term benefits of pre-schooling such as better attachment and commitment to school, more social and cognitive development, more positive achievement orientation, less delinquency and more enjoyability. It is perhaps for this reason that L. Pagani *et al.* (2003) and the High Scope Study (2005) argue that, indeed, something is coming out of early childhood settings. From the present writers' point of view, it would appear that pre-schooling promotes better social and cognitive functioning that result in a smoother transition to formal schooling.

The above discussion raises pertinent questions about the introduction of the ECD A and B classes in Zimbabwean primary schools. For example, how do the primary school teachers perceive the concepts of the ECD A and B? Furthermore, does the ECD pre-wire the infant child for a strong and worthwhile start in school? It is against this backdrop that the present study set out to investigate the attitudes of Zimbabwean primary school teachers towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes.

Methodology:

A. Research Design and Sample

The study employed the survey research design. Surveys are particularly suitable for harnessing people's attitudes towards some phenomenon since they allow the use of relatively large samples, like in this study (n=200) to permit meaningful generalization of results. Surveys also allow the collection of detailed descriptions of existing phenomena with the intent of using the data either to justify or repeal current practices or to make more intelligent plans to improve them (Mushoriwa, Sibanda & Nkambule, 2010). The purpose of the present study was to capture the teachers' attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes, with the ultimate aim of assessing the extent to which this programme is acceptable to them.

Participants consisted of 200 teachers drawn from urban and rural primary schools. They were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure an equal number of infant (n=100) and junior (n=100) teachers. These teachers were pooled from a number of schools located in Harare and some rural areas of Masvingo Province. The sample size (n=200) which was constrained by financial limitations was, however, considered large enough to warrant generalization of results, especially considering its configuration (urban-rural, infant-junior teachers); since the study assumed that teachers' attitudes would be influenced by place of residence (urban-rural), and grade taught (infant-junior).

B. Instruments

A structured questionnaire survey and follow-up interviews (for probing into subtle issues) were the instruments used to source data from the respondents in this study. The questionnaire largely used the Likert scale (items 1-10) and one open-ended item (item 11) which invited any other comments regarding the ECD A and B classes. The non-imposing and non-assuming open-ended item was felt necessary since it allowed the hearing of the teachers' own perceptions about the ECD A and B classes as much as possible but of course within the confines of the research design.

The Likert scale used Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Participants were required to choose an option that went with their views and opinions regarding given statements about the ECD A and B classes. In the analysis of the data, A and SA were collapsed to mean positive attitude while D and SD were also collapsed to mean negative attitude towards the statement. The neutral point (Undecided) was not included for purposes of analysis in order to make the results directional. Scoring the Likert scale needed the following:

Table 1
Scoring the Likert Scale

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
Positive Statement	5	4	3	2	1
Negative Statement	1	2	3	4	5

All questionnaire statements were classified into positive and negative. Positive statements were scored 5 for SA down to 1 for SD, while negative statements were scored 1 for SA up to 5 for SD. Item scores for each participant were next added up to obtain his/her total attitude score.

Since the questionnaire had ten items that required Likert scale type of analysis, there was a maximum possible score of 50 (5x10) and a necessary minimum score of 10 (1x10). In order to see whether the respondents' attitudes were positive or negative, a score above the midway of the maximum possible score ($50 \div 2 = 25$) was regarded positive, while scores below that were regarded negative. As already noted, the neutral point (Undecided) was not included for purposes of analysis in order to make the results directional (Fishbein, 1975).

In the present study, high scale scores (scores above 25) mean a favourable attitude towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes, while low scale scores (25 and below) show an unfavourable attitude. Overall, if there are more high scale scores than low scale scores, the conclusion is that teachers have a favourable attitude towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes.

The respondents were also required to give a reason for the answers they chose. This allowed an in-depth analysis of their views and why they held such views.

C. Reliability of Instrument, Objectives of the study, Hypotheses, and Statistics

The questionnaire was given to 6 raters who were considered experts in attitudinal studies. The raters were required to rate (out of 10) the suitability of the questionnaire as a measure of attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes. Inter-rater reliability analysis yielded a sufficiently acceptable coefficient (0.64), indicating that the questionnaire was highly reliable and, hence, suitable for measuring the teachers' attitudes.

The study sought to: (1) Find out the attitudes of both infant and junior teachers towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes; and (2) Find out the effect of ECD A and B classes on pupils' performance in grade one.

The study hypothesized that there is no significant difference in attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes between: (1) urban and rural teachers; and (2) infant and junior teachers.

Cramer's V ($X^2/N(K-1)$) was the statistic used to determine whether there were significant differences in attitude between urban and rural teachers as well as between infant and junior teachers.

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Hypotheses Testing

Coded data were key-punched for analysis and the following results were obtained:

Total no. of high scale scores (26-50) = 120 (60%).

Total no. of low scale scores (10-25) = 80 (40%).

As shown above, the total number of high scale scores (120) is more than the total number of low scale scores (80). Since the number of high scale scores is more than the number of low scale scores, it means that the majority of teachers (60%) were in favour of the introduction of the ECD A and B classes. The study showed that the majority of teachers had a positive attitude towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes.

The study hypothesized that there is no significant difference in attitudes between urban and rural teachers and between infant and junior teachers towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes. As already indicated, the hypotheses were tested using Cramer's $V(X^2/N(K-1))$. The results are shown in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2
Crosstab of Place of Residence (Urban-Rural) by Attitude (n=200)

Place of Residence	n	% Positive Attitude
Urban	100	49.5%
Rural	100	50.5%
Total	200	100%

Cramer's $V=0,04$

Alpha level.

* Significant at 0.01 level.

** Significant at 0.05 level.

Since Cramer's V is 0.04, it means there is a very low positive relationship between the teachers' place of residence (urban-rural) and their attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes in primary schools. This very low relationship (0.04) which in practice means no relationship between the variables (Mulder, 1982) fails to reach statistical significance. This indicates that urban and rural teachers perceive the introduction of the ECD A and B classes similarly. Hence, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in attitudes between urban and rural teachers towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes in primary schools. Thus, this first hypothesis was borne out in this study.

Table 3
 Crosstab of Class (Infant-Junior) by Attitude (n=200)

Class	n	% Positive Attitude
Infant	100	46.5%
Junior	100	53.5%
Total	200	100%

Cramer's V=*0.52.

Alpha Level

*Significant at 0.01 level.

**Significant at 0.05 level.

Since Cramer's V is *0.52, it means that there is a moderate positive relationship between the teachers' classes (infant-junior) and their attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes. This relationship reaches statistical significance at 0.01; indicating that there is a significant difference in attitudes between infant and junior teachers. Infant teachers were more rejecting (46.5% attitude) than junior teachers (53.5% attitude). Therefore, the claims of the second hypothesis that there is no significant difference in attitudes between infant and junior teachers was not borne out.

The 11 questionnaire items were themselves taken as rating scales and were analyzed individually. As already indicated, subjects were required to give reasons for their answers. Table 4 summarizes the responses to the questionnaire items.

Table 4
 No and % of Subjects Showing Favourable or Unfavourable Attitudes towards the Questionnaire Items (n=200)

Item	No & % with Favourable Attitudes	No & % with Unfavourable Attitudes
1. The introduction of the ECD A and B classes is a good idea.	144 (72%)	56 (28%)
<i>Stem.</i> Compared to children who have not attended the ECD, children who have attended the ECD:		
2. Have less adjustment problems when they start school.	181 (90.52%)	19 (9.5%)
3. Have less behaviour problems when they start school.	101 (50.5%)	99 (49.5%)
4. Are likely to do better in academic work.	127 (63.5%)	73 (36.5%)
5. Develop certain habits that are more counter-productive to school learning.	112 (56%)	88 (44%)
6. The curriculum of the ECD A and B classes links with what children do in Grade 1.	131 (65.5%)	69 (34.5%)

7. Children without the ECD experience are at risk for academic failure.	100 (50%)	100 (50%)
8. Children who have not done ECD should not be admitted into Grade 1.	140 (70%)	60 (30%)
9. The ECD A and B classes should be in premises of its own.	100 (50%)	100 (50%)
10. The ECD A and B classes in our school still have serious problems.	121 (60.5%)	79 (39.5%)

Discussion

Item 1 required respondents to indicate whether the introduction of the ECD A and B classes was a good idea or not. The responses to this item, which was meant to assess the degree to which the introduction of the ECD A and B classes was acceptable to teachers, show over-whelming support (72%) for the introduction of the ECD A and B classes. Most of the respondents argued that children who attended the ECD A and B classes are most likely to show less adjustment problems (item 2; 90.5%), less behaviour problems (item 3; 50.5%), and better performance in their academic work (item 4; 63.5%) when they start Grade 1. Interview data indicated that this is so because the children are already familiar with the school environment and are aware of the school's academic expectations mostly through interaction with those already at school.

Studies such as those by L. Pagani *et al.* (2003) have demonstrated that teachers tend to be more receptive to children with less problems. Therefore, if it is accepted that children who have attended ECD A and B classes have less adjustment and behaviour problems, it means that these children are most likely to enjoy a better working relationship with teachers and this enhances their learning. Such children are more likely to have better attitudes and commitment to school (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebonov, 1994) and better social skills and greater ability to focus (Anonymous, 2010). It is perhaps for this reason that G. Bugwadia (2010) says that what a child learns at this stage can greatly enhance his/her overall educational process and plays a vital role in the successful progression of all his/her future education endeavours.

Teachers who felt that attending ECD A and B classes did not give the children an advantage over those who have not attended ECD A and B classes (item 4; 36.5%) argued that although initially, children who have not attended ECD A and B classes tend to profile a lower level of academic performance, this trend is soon reversed in many of the children. To this extent, there was a strong feeling among these teachers that denying children who have not done ECD a chance to enter formal school would be an obstruction of justice and, hence, a transverse of human rights. The responses to item 7 show that teachers were divided over the issue of whether it is those who have not done ECD who are more at risk for academic failure. Fifty

percent of the teachers said that children who have not done the ECD were more at risk for academic failure, while the other 50% said they were not; arguing that it all depends on many factors such as the child's Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and the extent to which the early social and cognitive stimulation can be sustained by the child, school and the home; lest these early social and cognitive gains fade.

Item 5 required respondents to indicate whether children who have done the ECD develop certain habits that are counter-productive to school learning. Fifty-six percent of the teachers, mostly infant teachers (77%), felt that in most cases, children who do the ECD, especially those taught by unqualified teachers, are taught wrong procedures in Mathematics and word-building in the languages. Some of these teachers also felt that children who have done ECD give problems by trying to show off to both teachers and the other children that they already know so much. In the process, these children cause disruptions to lessons and classroom procedures and activities. Some teachers, however, expressed the hope that if every child did ECD, perhaps such "show off" behaviour would disappear since at least theoretically, most children would realize that they are at the same level.

In item 8, the majority of the teachers (70%) felt that all children who come for Grade 1 should have done ECD. The major reason given was that the ECD helps in preparing children for Grade 1 by equipping them with appropriate behaviour control skills necessary for interacting with others in school and group settings. Children learn and realize the importance of sharing ideas and materials and of working as a unified group before entering Grade 1. It is perhaps for this reason that L.B.L. Freitas, T.L. Shelton and J.R.H. Tudge (2008) claim that appropriate early childhood education is fundamental for the child's later educational development. If the child has any development or educational problems, these can be detected early and appropriate action taken to eliminate or minimize their effects.

While item 6 indicates that the majority of teachers (65.5%) felt that the curriculum of ECD was appropriate. In item 10, many of the teachers (60.5%) indicated that the ECD in their schools still has numerous problems such as lack of human and material resources, teaching space, and so on. From the writers' point of view, it is important that these issues be addressed soon since they are integral to the quality of any programme.

Worthy of a special note is that while the idea of ECD A and B classes was supported by the majority of the teachers (60%) in the study sample, half the number of teachers (50%) felt that the ECD A and B classes should be in its own premises (item 9), arguing that this would reduce congestion in schools. The other 50% of the teachers felt that ECD A and B classes should be part of the primary school system if the children are to be fully prepared for the formal school system. Since the teachers are divided over this issue, from the writers' point of view, it makes more sense to have the ECD A and B classes as part of the primary school if space allows as this acquaints the children with the formal school system.

From the open-ended item (item 11) which was meant to capture the teachers' views about any other issues relating to the ECD that might not have been captured

through the 10 Likert – type items, calls were made to the Government to, among other things, reduce the teacher – pupil ratio and to provide qualified teachers as a matter of urgency if the ECD is to develop, activate, and improve children's competencies for school entry. Such a call stresses the importance and relevance of the ECD as an early learning and enrichment programme.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, it should be noted that there was great unanimity of opinion among the majority of teachers (60%) in the study sample regarding the introduction of the ECD A and B classes in Zimbabwe's primary schools. The majority of the teachers were in favour of the introduction of the ECD. Both urban and rural teachers held similar views regarding the introduction of the ECD A and B classes. However, a significant difference in attitudes towards the introduction of the ECD A and B classes was observed between infant and junior teachers, with infant teachers more rejecting to the idea of the introduction of the ECD A and B classes.

All in all, in the present writers' view, the research outcomes from this study, indeed, hold promise for the ECD and tentatively provide mandate to the Zimbabwean government to go ahead with the idea of the ECD A and B classes.

In the light of this study's findings, it is recommended that: (1) the Zimbabwean government should, as a matter of urgency, ensure that both human and material resources needed for the effective establishment and functioning of the ECD A and B classes are put in place; and (2) a similar study, involving other stakeholders such as parents, be conducted to see if there is consensus by the stakeholders regarding the introduction of the ECD A and B classes.

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