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FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT: STRATEGIES FOR STAKEHOLDER COOPERATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract

Investigated strategies for stakeholder cooperation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Zambia. Emphasized collaboration between government, educators, families, and community organizations. Applied an interpretivist-phenomenological design with qualitative methods (interviews, observations, document review). Involved 10 purposively selected participants. Identified key barriers and enablers of stakeholder engagement. Recommended improved communication, stakeholder training, and formal collaboration policies.

Keywords:

Collaboration, Early Childhood, Engagement, Stakeholders

1. Introduction

ECE is foundational for a child's lifelong development. Stakeholder cooperation is crucial yet often ineffective in Zambia. The study is anchored in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory.

2. Problem Statement

Stakeholder collaboration in ECE is limited due to:

- Inadequate involvement of families and communities.
- Communication breakdowns and lack of shared responsibilities.
- Absence of clearly structured collaboration frameworks.

3. Aim and Objectives

Aim:
To explore collaborative strategies among stakeholders in Zambia's ECE system.

Objectives:

- Identify effective stakeholder engagement strategies.
- Examine stakeholders' roles in child development.
- Evaluate mechanisms for sustaining multi-sectoral partnerships.

4. Literature Review

Early childhood education (ECE) is not only fundamental but foundational in shaping the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of every child. According to Crossland (2017), the years from birth to eight are recognized as a critical period for laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and well-being. Early Childhood Education and stakeholders help in fostering holistic child development roles in cognitive growth, emotional intelligence, social skills, and physical well-being. During this stage, the brain develops at an extraordinary rate, forming connections that influence future learning and problem-solving abilities.

Piaget's theory connects child development to discovery and active learning thereby promoting cognitive development (Wavering, 2011; Crossland, 2017). Therefore, child caregivers and other stakeholders need to be involved at this level of development to enhance

the intelligence, behaviorism, critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities and language development.

Emotional development is another cornerstone of holistic child development. ECE programs create a safe and nurturing environment where children learn to identify and manage their emotions. Erikson's theory was based on what is known as the epigenetic principle. If a child successfully develops trust, the child will feel safe and secure in the world (Kendra&Amy, 2023). Therefore, all ECE stakeholders should be informed about this type of development.

Social interaction is a key component of early childhood education. In ECE settings, children engage with peers and adults, learning essential interpersonal skills such as cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution (Rumjaun&Narod, 2020). According to Bandura on Social learning theory, Behaviorism and cognitive development depend on the interactions and modelling of a person (McLeod, 2016). This means that there is need to engage all stakeholders in order to achieve acceptable social development.

Montessori's physical development refers to the brain, senses and muscles as a network that people utilize to express their actions and thoughts (Angeline, Megan&Paige, 2017). Child movement is woven throughout a Montessori education to develop three key areas of a child's physical development: motor control, motor coordination and sensorial information (Angleine&Magan, 2017). Physical development in early childhood is equally critical for global citizenry (Raimondi, 2018; Leonard, 2015). Awareness campaigns on importance of child physical development by ECE stakeholders may enhance better knowledge ob child care hence the need for collaboration.

Child development experts indicate that during early years of child development, children develop linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and regulatory skills that predict their later functioning in many domains (Trawick-Smith, 2014; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012).The benefits of ECE extend well beyond the immediate child developmental gains. Research shows that children who participate in high-quality ECE programs with stakeholder engagement are more likely to perform well academically, graduate from high school, and pursue higher education (Nelson&Michelle, 2022). They are also less likely to engage in delinquent behavior or experience unemployment due to the skills, attitudes, knowledge and experiences acquired from ECE to higher education (Bakken, Brown&Downing, 2017). From a societal perspective, investing in ECE and stakeholder cooperation yields significant economic returns (Bakken et al, 2017. According to Barnett (1995), there is considerable evidence that a high-quality early

education and stakeholder collaboration creates improved life outcomes. Children who receive quality early education alongside support from caregivers are more likely to become productive members of society, reducing the burden on social welfare systems and contributing to economic growth. Therefore, there is significant need to engage and cooperate stakeholders in ECE so that all the developments are enhanced not only at school but everywhere in the child's community.

5. Context of ECE in Zambia

- Pre-independence: ECE was informal, run by private/religious organizations.
- Post-2011: ECE incorporated into the national education policy.
- 2022: The Government introduced free education from ECE to secondary level.
- Ongoing issues: low enrolment, limited access in rural areas, teacher shortages, and underfunded infrastructure.

6. Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory (1979):

- **Microsystem:** Family and teacher interactions.
- **Mesosystem:** Collaboration between schools and communities.
- **Exosystem:** Influence of local governance and policies.
- **Macrosystem:** Cultural values and societal norms shaping ECE implementation.

7. Methodology

- **Paradigm:** Interpretivist.
- **Design:** Phenomenological.
- **Participants:** 10 (5 ECE teachers and 5 PTA members).
- **Sampling:** Purposive.
- **Data Collection:** Interviews, observations, document analysis.
- **Analysis:** Thematic analysis based on patterns from stakeholder responses.

8. Results

8.1 Stakeholder Interaction (Table 1 Overview)

- Stakeholder meeting frequency varied.
- Barriers: long distances, seasonal constraints, low turnout.

8.2 Stakeholder Perceptions (Table 2 Overview)

- Engagement seen as daily child support.
- Collaboration often perceived as infrastructure/fundraising effort.

8.3 Challenges Identified (Table 3 Overview)

- Financial hardship, communication gaps, lack of policy clarity.
- Cultural barriers and language exclusion.
- Donor disengagement due to community priorities and misunderstanding of local contexts.

9. Discussion

- Many rural stakeholders are unaware of ECE's long-term benefits.
- Collaboration is hindered by outdated perceptions and socioeconomic challenges.
- Lessons from international models could inform policy and practice.
- There is a need for a stakeholder collaboration assessment framework.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Policy Development:

- Establish a national framework for stakeholder collaboration in ECE.

10.2 Awareness Campaigns:

- Multilingual, culturally relevant materials to sensitise communities.

10.3 Training & Capacity Building:

- Workshops for parents, teachers, and PTA committees on stakeholder roles.

10.4 Communication Systems:

- Structured and inclusive communication channels between schools and communities.

10.5 Feedback Mechanisms:

- Periodic assessments and reviews to improve collaborative engagement.

11. Conclusion

From this research, it can be deduced that cooperation and engagement among stakeholders is essential for ensuring the success of ECE in Zambia. When stakeholders collaborate effectively, they can create a supportive learning environment that meets the diverse and required needs of children. Participant A1 and A2 alluded that distance from schools is a challenge to engagement. This can be resolved, once all stakeholders collaborate in ECE school building projects so that children walk reasonable distances. Governments, educators, and communities must prioritize access to high-quality early education to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential. As the adage goes, "The first five years have so much to do with how the next 80 turn out." This entails that ECE should be considered with an objective rigor to promote local and international citizenry. Investing in ECE though collaboration is not just an investment in individual futures but in the collective future of society (Bakken et al, 2017). In conclusion, applying Bronfenbrenner's Bi-ecological theory in Zambian ECE centres requires a recognition that communities are made-up of diverse systems. These systems outlined as families, schools, traditional and religious groups, the government, local and international organizations and donors need to create collaborative strategies. By including these community groups, stakeholder engagement and cooperation can be enhanced hence achieve ECE national and global objectives.

Ethical clearance was sought from the University of the Free state as this study is a PhD project conducted in Shibuyunj district in the rural area of Central Province-Zambia.

12. Ethical Considerations

- Approved by the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee, University of the Free State (Ref: UFS-HSD2024/0155).

13. Acknowledgments

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14. Competing Interests

- No conflicts of interest declared.

15. Funding

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16. Data Availability

- Data supporting the findings is available upon request from the author or supervisor.

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