

# **An Investigation into Teacher Perceptions on School Readiness Assessment in Choma District, Zambia**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The assessment of school readiness in early childhood education is a multifaceted process encompassing various developmental domains. This study investigated teachers' perceptions on school readiness assessment practices in Choma District primary schools. Using a qualitative approach and case design, data was generated through interviews and focus group discussions with 20 participants, including ECE teachers and school managers selected purposively. The findings revealed that ECE teachers primarily relied on basic assessment tools such as observation, which was deemed insufficient for effectively assessing school readiness. Assessment practices across the district lacked consistency, as they were largely dependent on teacher-created methods such as screening and observation. Limited training on advanced assessment techniques further hindered comprehensive assessment of learners. Teachers also faced significant challenges, including resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate classroom space, insufficient teaching and learning materials, limited parental involvement, and a lack of professional development opportunities. As such, the study proposes increased support for teachers through resources and professional development programmes, to improve school readiness assessments. In addition, schools could foster stronger communication with parents and the community to encourage greater involvement in their children's education. The study concludes that strengthening assessment practices in ECE is key to ensure a more accurate and comprehensive assessment of school readiness. Enhancing teacher training, providing necessary resources, and implementing standardised assessment methods will contribute to a more effective and equitable early learning environment.

**Key Words:** Teacher, Assessment, Early Childhood Education, School Readiness

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Throughout history, societies have recognized the importance of preparing children for formal schooling (Kit, 2019). According to Smith and Shepard (2015) the origins of assessing school readiness can be traced back to ancient civilizations, such as Ancient Greece and Rome, where formal education played a crucial role in society. In these societies, children had to demonstrate certain cognitive and physical abilities before they were considered ready for schooling. The assessment methods used during this time were largely based on observation and informal assessments by parents and educators (Williams, 2019).

During the medieval period, education was predominantly provided by religious institutions. Assessing school readiness in this period was based on religious and moral criteria, with children being evaluated on their ability to recite prayers, demonstrate basic religious knowledge, and engage in appropriate behavior (Hamerslag, 2018). This approach reflected the importance placed on religious education at the time and served as a foundation for future assessments. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed significant advancements in the field of education, with the emergence of formal schooling systems. As education became more standardised, the need to assess school readiness became more apparent (Halle, 2020). This period saw the development of standardised assessments for school readiness that assessed children's cognitive and academic abilities. These focused on areas such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and were used to determine a child's readiness for entry into formal education (Mashburn et al, 2018).

The assessment of school readiness in early childhood education is a multifaceted process encompassing various developmental domains. In Zambia, school readiness remains a significant concern, requiring collaboration among sectors such as education, social services, and child protection to address the comprehensive needs of young children. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is recognized as a vital component in equipping children for school readiness (Mambwe et al., 2023).

As outlined in the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013), assessment involves evaluating a child's physical development, including gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and overall health. Additionally, appraisal extends to social and emotional development, covering aspects such as self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and interactions with others. Cognitive development is also a crucial focus, involving assessments of language and literacy skills, numeracy proficiency, and problem-solving abilities (Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, 2013). Furthermore, the assessment includes an exploration of creative development, encompassing a child's imagination, creativity, and self-expression, (Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, 2013).

To conduct assessment, a combination of standardised tools, teacher observations, and parental input is employed, adapting to the child's age and the specific ECE setting. The Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013) identifies several indicators for measuring school readiness, ranging from a child's ability to follow instructions and communicate effectively to their problem-solving skills and emotional regulation. In response to these goals, the Zambian government has implemented various initiatives, including expanding access to ECE centers, developing a national ECE curriculum, investing in teacher training, and engaging parents in supporting their children's learning at home. (Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013).

Further, the Zambian School Curriculum Framework of 2013 acknowledges the importance of ECE and the readiness of children to start schooling. The curriculum recognizes that children need to be equipped with a foundation of skills and knowledge before they can effectively engage in formal education. Additionally, the Ministry of Education (MoE) through the Fifth National Development Plan 2006-2010, recognized ECE readiness as an essential part of the education system, stating that ECE is the foundation for lifelong learning and development. The Ministry sets out a number of goals for ECE, including increasing access to quality ECE for all children entering school, regardless of their background or location through the Directorate of Early Childhood Education (MoE, 2010). The National Child Policy 2015 - 2021 (NCP) highlights that the government of Zambia developed and implemented a system of ECE development and assessment to track progress towards achieving ECE goals and identify children who need additional support as they enter primary education.

In many educational contexts, including Zambia, school readiness assessments often rely on observational methods. According to Banda & Phiri (2021) these involve teachers observing children during play or structured activities to assess their developmental progress. Teachers might observe how children interact with peers, perform basic tasks like drawing or counting, and communicate. Observational checklists are commonly used to guide these assessments. However, studies have shown that while observations are valuable, they may not always provide a comprehensive picture of a child's readiness, as they can be subjective and dependent on the teacher's interpretation (Banda & Phiri, 2021).

Despite the positive outcomes of these programmes, gaps remain in effectively assessing school readiness, particularly in rural areas. Several key elements including socioeconomic inequalities, parental engagement, and school facilities significantly influence children's readiness for the transition to primary education (Lungu, 2021). Moreover, the lack of standardised assessment tools and cohesive transition programmes between ECE and primary school exacerbate these challenges, leading to mismatches in instructional approaches and children's readiness levels. A key factor influencing school readiness in Zambia is parental involvement. Research indicates that children demonstrate greater school readiness when their parents actively engage in their early learning experiences (Lungu, 2021). However, limited awareness and financial constraints often hinder parents' ability to support their children's learning at home. These socioeconomic challenges also affect the availability of learning materials, such as books and educational toys, which are crucial for fostering cognitive development in young children (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Furthermore, the study by Mambwe et al. (2021) and Kalinde et al. (2021) emphasized challenges such as

limited parental involvement, digital inequality, and the absence of well-structured transition programs. In the same vein, Lungu (2021) found that teachers faced time constraints, with tight schedules leaving little room for in-depth assessments. Additionally, there was a lack of engagement from parents, which further complicated the assessment process. Teachers indicated that parental involvement is crucial for supporting children's readiness at home, yet many parents were not sufficiently involved (Lungu, 2021). Moreover, teachers often report overcrowded classrooms, which limit their ability to assess each child individually (Chanda & Bwalya, 2020). Another critical challenge is the limited professional development opportunities available to teachers. Many ECE teachers in Zambia may not have received adequate training in using advanced assessment tools or interpreting results to inform teaching strategies (Ngulube & Zulu, 2020).

While there is substantial evidence pointing to the significant problem of low school readiness in Zambia, there is a notable gap in understanding the perceptions of ECE teachers in assessing the school readiness of children entering primary education. This gap is of paramount importance, as the perspectives and challenges faced by ECE teachers are pivotal in shaping effective strategies to enhance school readiness, (Kapenda & Besa, 2019). As a result, there is a pressing need to investigate and address these challenges to ensure consistent and effective school readiness assessment practices in Choma District.

### **Study Objectives**

The following specific research objectives guided the study;

- 1) To probe current practices in school readiness assessments in ECE centers in Choma district.
- 2) To examine the perceptions of ECE teachers in assessing school readiness in ECE centers in Choma District.
- 3) To uncover challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments

### **Significance of the study**

This study is a contribution to the body of knowledge on Early Childhood Education in Zambia. The research findings are relevant towards informing and improving policy formulation and implementation on the subject matter. As such, the study may contribute towards achieving the national development plans such as the Eighth National Development Plan 2022-2023. In addition, this study is also a contribution towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially Goal 4 'Quality Education' offering quality, equitable and inclusive education.

By understanding the perceptions of ECE teachers in assessing children's readiness for primary education, the study will provide valuable insights into how to enhance the effectiveness of early childhood education programmes. ECE teachers play a critical role in this process, and their experience will inform how assessment practices can be improved to better support children's transition to primary education. By investigating their perspectives and experiences, the study can shed light on the challenges they face and the strategies they use to assess school readiness. This will inform professional development programmes and policies to support ECE teachers in their roles. In addition, it will also help the headteachers and other teachers in coming up with best ways of assessing children entering grade.

### **Scope of the study**

The study was delimited to Choma district, Zambia, and was not be representative of school readiness assessment practices in other districts or regions within Zambia or in different countries. The focus was specifically investigating teacher perceptions on school readiness assessments practices in ECE centres in Choma District primary school. According to the Choma District Education Board Secretary annual report (2023), the district has a total of 86 ECE teachers in 18 zones.

### **Limitation of study**

This study's findings should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. The potential for social desirability bias in teacher responses may have affected data accuracy, while the exclusive focus on Choma

District limits generalizability to other Zambian regions with different educational contexts. Time and logistical constraints restricted data collection depth and participant inclusion, possibly introducing selection bias. The researcher's dual role and reliance on self-reports rather than direct classroom metrics raise additional validity concerns. These limitations underscore the need for cautious application of results and suggest valuable directions for future research to address these methodological challenges.

## Theoretical framework

Social constructivism, developed by Lev Vygotsky, posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and cultural contexts. The concept highlights how social interaction and collaborative learning facilitate cognitive growth, particularly within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners accomplish tasks with support from more skilled individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Unlike individualistic theories, social constructivism views learning as inherently social, highlighting the importance of community and shared experiences in shaping understanding (The Open University, n.d). This approach has significant implications for educational practices, advocating for collaborative learning environments (Saleem et al, 2021).

The social constructivist perspective posits that meaningful learning emerges through collaborative interactions among learners, educators, and their social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of assessing teacher perceptions on school readiness assessment in Choma District, Zambia, this feature guided the study to focus on how teachers collaborate and communicate to evaluate school readiness. Teachers' perceptions may be shaped through their professional discussions, experiences with parents, and shared cultural expectations of children's preparedness for school. The theory highlights that teachers' understanding of readiness emerges not in isolation but through interactions within their professional and social networks (Saleem et al, 2021).

Further, the theory places teachers as active participants in shaping knowledge and understanding, which is crucial in assessing school readiness (Ecampus Ontario, n.d.). Teachers' participation in workshops, discussions, or field assessments allows them to form their perceptions about what constitutes school readiness. This engaged participation underscores teachers' agency in contextualizing and implementing assessment policies and tools within their specific educational settings (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2018). Consequently, examining their involvement provides valuable insights into how these professional experiences shape their perceptions of school readiness assessments' efficacy and constraints.

According to Saleem et al (2021) social constructivism emphasises the role of culture and societal norms in shaping learning processes and perceptions. When assessing teacher perceptions on school readiness, it is essential to explore how the local cultural context influences their views. Factors such as community values, family roles, and socio-economic conditions may affect how teachers define and assess a child's preparedness for school (Western Governors University, 2005). Readiness might focus not only on academic skills but also on social behaviors, independence, and adaptability shaped by cultural expectations. This feature allows the study to highlight the unique cultural dynamics that inform teachers' perceptions and assessments.

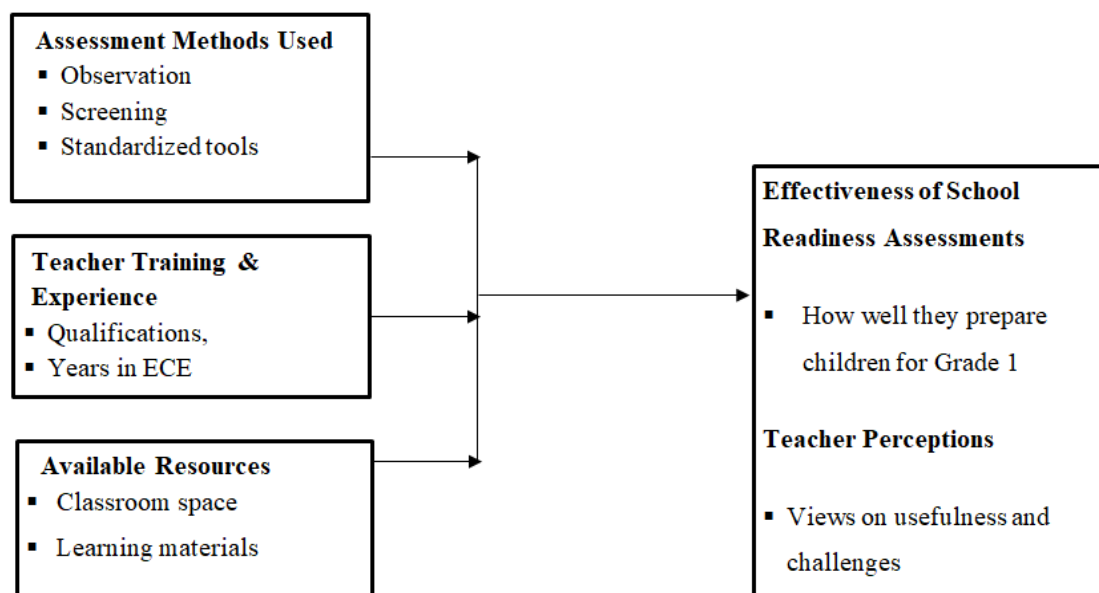
Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that individuals achieve higher understanding with support from more knowledgeable others (Western Governors University, 2005). In this study, the ZPD was used to assess how teachers' knowledge and perceptions of school readiness are enhanced through collaboration, mentoring, and professional development. Teachers in Choma District might benefit from working with educational specialists, participating in peer learning, or receiving training on school readiness assessment tools. The scaffolding provided through professional development enables educators to develop more nuanced understandings of school readiness, leading to more consistent application of assessment criteria (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2018). Examining this developmental process through a Vygotskian lens revealed critical training needs while informing recommendations for strengthening teachers' assessment competencies.

In the study, the social constructivism theory guided the examination of how ECE teachers use a combination of standardised tools, observations, and parental input for assessing various domains of child development, including physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and creative aspects. This aligns with the goals outlined in the



Zambian Ministry of Education's Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, which aims to promote holistic child development and prepare children for success in primary school. The study, informed by the social constructivism theory, explored how assessment practices not only provide insights into a child's readiness for formal schooling but also serve to identify specific areas of strength and areas that may require additional support.

## Conceptual framework



The assessment methods used directly influence the effectiveness of school readiness assessments. For example, if teachers rely only on basic observation without structured tools, assessments may be less consistent. Similarly, teacher training and experience affect how accurately they conduct assessments and interpret results. Well-trained teachers are more likely to use varied methods effectively, improving readiness outcomes.

Available resources shape both teacher perceptions and implementation challenges. If classrooms are overcrowded or lack materials, teachers may struggle to assess each child properly. This can lead to negative perceptions about assessments, as teachers feel unsupported. On the other hand, sufficient resources help teachers follow best practices, making assessments smoother and more reliable.

The challenges teachers face are often a result of interactions between all independent variables. For instance, even if a teacher is trained, limited resources (like few assessment tools) can create difficulties. Similarly, if assessment methods are too complex for the available training, teachers may find them hard to implement. These interactions show that improving school readiness assessments requires addressing multiple factors together methods, training, and resources not just one.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessing school readiness is an important factor in determining the child's transition to primary school. School readiness, which indicates readiness of the individual child to enter school (Brooks & Murray, 2018), is a condition in which a child is ready to engage in learning experiences at school. In Zambia the education system has adopted more standardised assessment methods, aligning with global trends (Whittaker, 2017). The two types of assessments commonly used with preschool children are developmental screening tests and readiness tests.

Developmental screening tests evaluate a child's attainment of motor, communication, sensory, or cognitive milestones to determine if they are progressing at expected rates of maturation and learning (USAID, 2014). While readiness tests, such as the Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) and the Care for Development Appraisal Tool (CDA), measure children's preparedness for classroom participation and identify

those needing early intervention (Rafique & Nadeem, 2011; Tymms & Bailey, 2013). These tools assess domains such as reading, math, executive function, and personal-social development, often integrating context-specific modifications (Fink et al., 2012; Save the Children, 2013).

Understanding the various dimensions of school readiness is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers to support children effectively during this important phase. Studies done by Bustamante et al., (2017) have shown that there are various domains of assessing school readiness. Some of the various domains include cognitive development, emotional readiness, as well as language and communication (Bustamante et al, 2017).

Cognitive development refers to a child's mental abilities, including problem-solving, language skills, and basic numeracy (The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). A child's capacity to think, learn, and process information is fundamental for success in a formal educational setting. This dimension involves skills like recognising letters and numbers, understanding basic concepts, and developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills (The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). Attention and memory skills are essential for a child to actively engage in learning tasks in school. Further, a study by Halle et al., (2020) found that social and emotional readiness encompasses a child's ability to interact positively with peers and adults, manage emotions, and navigate social situations. This dimension emphasises skills like sharing, cooperation, self-control, empathy, and the capacity to express feelings appropriately (Halle et al, 2020).

Apart from the various domains in understanding the current practices in school readiness, authors such as Pianta et al (2018), Davies et al (2018) and others unveil various methods developed to evaluate different dimensions of readiness, ranging from cognitive skills to social and emotional development. In today's educational landscape, assessing school readiness has become an essential process for teachers. It involves evaluating a child's preparedness for formal schooling, both academically and socially.

Standardised assessments are widely used tools to measure school readiness. These tests are designed to provide a standardised and objective measure of a child's skills and abilities in areas such as cognitive development, language proficiency, and motor skills (Pianta et al, 2018). In addition, observational methods as found by Davies et al (2018) involve systematic and structured observations of a child's behavior in various contexts, such as classroom settings or during play. Davis et al. (2018) suggest that this approach allows educators to assess a child's social skills, behavior, and interactions with peers and adults. Observational assessments provide rich, context-specific information, but may be time-intensive and require trained observers.

Teachers perceive school readiness as a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses various skills and abilities. A study by Smith & Wilson (2021) found that teachers emphasised both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of readiness, including language and literacy skills, social-emotional development, and self-regulation abilities. This holistic perspective reflects a growing understanding that school readiness is not solely based on academic achievements but also on socio-emotional competencies (Smith & Wilson, 2021). These factors are interlinked and influence how teachers approach assessments.

Brown (2019) suggests that teachers' perceptions of school readiness are generally positive. However, there is also evidence that teachers may have different expectations for learners from different backgrounds or with different abilities. For example, Hamre et al, (2018) found that teachers are more likely to perceive girls as being ready for school than boys, or learners from well to do families as being more ready than those from low status families. Furthermore, the literature highlights that teachers' perceptions of school readiness are influenced by their own experiences and beliefs. A study by Smith et al. (2019) revealed that teachers' personal experiences as parents or caregivers affected their perceptions of readiness.

Smith and Green (2021) observed that conducting school readiness assessments is not without its challenges. One of the prominent challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments is the scarcity of resources, including time, materials, and personnel (Dickinson & Neuman, 2017). ECE teachers face time constraints due to the demands of a dynamic classroom environment. Balancing instructional time with assessment activities is a delicate task (Wahab, 2015). Finding sufficient time to conduct thorough assessments while also providing meaningful instruction can be challenging. Striking a balance between

formal, standardised assessments and informal, teacher-generated assessments is essential for a comprehensive understanding of a child's readiness (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2018). Navigating between these assessment types and interpreting results effectively can be a complex process for ECE teachers. Limited resources hinder their ability to administer comprehensive assessments and provide tailored support for each child.

## METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively investigate teacher perceptions of school readiness assessment in Choma district, this study employed a qualitative research approach. The use of qualitative methods offered rich and contextual insights into the perceptions of teachers on the study topic. One of the benefits of qualitative research was that the use of open-ended questioning and probing enabled participants to react in their own terms (Berg, 2001; Afzal & Azeem, 2008). This study adopted a case study research design. This design was ideal for capturing detailed information and identifying patterns within the population, providing a clear picture of the teachers' current practices in school readiness assessment among ECE centers, teachers perceptions as well as the challenges faced.

### Sample size and Sampling Technique

The study utilized a sample size of 20 participants, consisting of 10 ECE teachers, 5 school managers (1 from each of Choma District's 5 zones), and 1 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) comprising 5 teachers. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where participants were recruited until no new substantive themes emerged from the data, ensuring sufficient depth for qualitative analysis. Given the study's focus on teacher perceptions and assessment practices, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with specialized knowledge and experience in school readiness assessments. ECE teachers were chosen based on key criteria, including years of teaching experience, educational qualifications (e.g., certification in ECE), and direct involvement in conducting readiness assessments. School managers were included to provide administrative and policy perspectives, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of assessment implementation. The FGD allowed for interactive discussion, enriching the data through shared experiences. While the sample size was limited to maintain manageability and depth in qualitative analysis, the selection criteria ensured that participants could provide meaningful, context-rich insights aligned with the study's objectives.

### Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Primary data was collected by the researcher directly from the source through methods such as, interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs). Interview guides were used to evaluate how school readiness assessment was conducted by early childhood education teachers in primary schools in Choma district. The study also used FGD to generate information on the study objectives. The researcher organized one FGD of 5 ECE teachers from 1 zone whose inclusion was determined by saturation of the data. The researcher ensured that every participant in the FGD was given an opportunity to freely raise their point of view. This was essential in ensuring that data collected was triangulated to achieve credibility.

### Data Analysis

The researcher employed thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to ensure methodological rigor: data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts; systematic generation of initial codes using both inductive and deductive approaches; theme development by identifying patterns across codes; theme refinement through iterative review to ensure internal consistency and distinctiveness; clear definition and naming of themes with supporting evidence; and final report production with coherent narrative integration. To enhance reliability, intercoder agreement was established through independent coding by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Methodological rigor was further strengthened through member checking with participants to verify interpretation accuracy, maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions, and employing peer debriefing with fellow researchers to challenge emerging interpretations, thereby ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility

of findings while remaining grounded in the data's contextual realities.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical research clearance was sought from the University of Zambia Humanities and Social Science Ethical Committee. Approval to conduct the study in schools was granted by the Ministry of Education. Informed consents were obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study by the use of a written and signed consent form. The confidentiality of the participants was ensured by not revealing their identities in the report, rather pseudonyms were used. The researcher specified how data was to be used and who was going to have access to it. All Participants had the liberty to either participate in the study or not.

## FINDINGS

This section focused on the presentation of the findings structured around the research objectives to provide context, along with themes and subthemes derived from the collected data supported by verbatim excerpts.

### Current assessments practices in school readiness assessments in ECE centres

The first objective explored the frequency, methods, and tools used in these assessments, highlighting their role in developmental evaluation and the integration of technology to enhance accuracy and efficiency.

#### Frequency of school readiness assessments

Participants highlighted varying assessment frequencies, with monthly assessments being the most common. As shared by the participants below; Participant 2 shared that;

*“we normally do monthly and yearly. We teach before assessing because we can't just start assessing a child after a week or so without knowing them. You need to assess the child at least after a month and at the end of the year while you have known the child better.”*

Participant 1 FGD had this to say;

*“Normally, I do assess the learners on a daily basis, but for school readiness, I assess monthly. I want to see how the learner is progressing, how they are performing.”*

One of the Head Teachers revealed that; *“Teachers use observation daily, but monthly assessments include pre-tests such as coloring or tracing within a space. Termly assessments involve sitting with each learner to gauge progress,”* HT 4 shared.

The findings from the participants indicate that while daily observations are common, structured school readiness assessments in Choma District primarily occur monthly, which allows teachers to track gradual progress and tailor evaluations to individual learner development.

### Screening as the Foundation of Assessment

The study found that ECE teachers use various assessments methods, including screening, observation, and the use of standardized and teacher-made tools, often aligned with curriculum objectives. In an interview, Participant 1 FGD narrated.

*“When parents bring their child for enrollment, we first conduct screening to check if the child is ready for school. Screening continues for about a week or two, followed by observation and diagnostic assessments for placement.”*

In the same vein, other participants shared similar thoughts as presented below;

Participant 5 said,



*“We conduct screening the first day the child reports at school to understand how much they know and for placement purposes.”*

Participant 2 in the FGD added that, *“I do screening during the first two weeks before enrolling the learner.”*

The findings above reveal that screening serves as a critical initial step in school readiness assessments, allowing teachers to evaluate baseline competencies and inform appropriate learner placement, followed by continuous observation and diagnostic assessments to support individualized learning.

### **Observation as a core assessment method**

Further, observation emerges as a cornerstone of ECE assessment, offering a dynamic and non-intrusive way to understand children’s development, as shared by Participant 1;

*“We continue using observation as a way of assessing school readiness. As learners interact with their environment, I observe and record what I see.”*

HT 1 had this to say;

*“We use observation assessments throughout their entire stay in ECE. We don’t test them through writing; we observe them. For example, one day I saw the teacher using the observation method. She asked learners to sing a gospel song and recorded observations.”*

Participant 5 shared a similar thoughts saying; *“I use observation to assess physical development, like observing motor skills during play at the park.”*

The findings confirm that observation is a fundamental and continuous assessment method in ECE, allowing teachers to evaluate children's development naturally and holistically across various contexts social interactions, physical activities, and creative tasks. Its non-intrusive, real-time nature provides authentic insights into learners' progress, reinforcing its value as a key tool for formative assessment in early childhood education.

### **Use of Standardized and Teacher-Made Tools**

A combination of standardized tools is another method used as Participant 7 revealed that; *“We use two tools CDATZ and ICLAP, alongside observation.”*

Participant 4 FGD commented that;

*“I use ICLAP for physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development, as it covers all developmental domains. I also use portfolios.”*

Participants stressed the importance of aligning assessment methods with curriculum objectives. Participant 3 had this to say; *ICLAP covers all developmental domains, including activities for language, literacy, and physical development.”*

Participant 1 FGD further shared; *“The tools align well, as the child develops cognitively, spiritually, emotionally, and socially.”*

It was further established that ECE teachers in Choma District employ a mix of standardized tools and teacher-made assessments to holistically evaluate school readiness across multiple developmental domains. The use of ICLAP, in particular, was highlighted for its comprehensive coverage of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Additionally, portfolios and observation complemented these tools, providing a well-rounded assessment approach indicating that while structured tools provide consistency, teachers also value flexibility in tracking individual learner progress.

## Specific Methods for Developmental Domains

The study established that these methods ensure targeted assessments in physical, social-emotional, and language and literacy development, as Participant 5 disclosed;

*"I use a motor skills checklist to observe and record children's activities during play."*

As of Participant 4 FGD this is what was shared; *"We assess physical development by observing activities like running, jumping, and scribbling."*

Then Participant 5 FGD; *"I use picture reading, retelling stories, and letter recognition to assess literacy. I also use games involving sounds and syllables, assessing with ICLAP."*

The findings above show that ECE teachers employ domain-specific assessment methods tailored to different areas of child development. For physical development, structured tools like motor skills checklists and observation of play-based activities are used. In language and literacy development, interactive strategies such as picture reading, story retelling, letter recognition, and phonological awareness games are applied, often integrated with standardized tools like ICLAP.

## The perceptions of ECE teachers in assessing school readiness in ECE centers

The second objective of the study examined how the ECE teachers perceive school readiness assessment in ECE centers. It unveils findings on the effectiveness of ECE assessments in preparing learners for Grade One, and their impact on teaching practices.

### Effectiveness of assessments in preparing learners for Grade One

The study found that Assessments play a critical role in preparing ECE learners for Grade One, as they help teachers evaluate the developmental and academic readiness of children. Teachers shared their perceptions on the effectiveness of assessments.

Participant 1 shared that;

*"As for me they are very effective, because when for example by the class I was teaching last year, I think 90% of them went to grade 1 and are able to write and read. So I think it's very effective."*

Another Participant 7 had a similar view saying;

*"It's very effective in the sense that, my goal is that by the time a child is leaving my class, they should be able to sound out some letters, they should be able to read the syllables, they should be able to read simple words. They should be able to write also their own names. They should be able to copy what they see on the board. Therefore, I see these assessments to very important because we prepare the learners for the next grade."*

Participant 3 FGD also commented that,

*"I would also give another example, look at a child who comes to school for the first time, as time goes on and this child is slowly learning how to interact with fellow learners, and starts to love school. They finally stop this system of crying because they are now used to being in school. So by the time this child goes to grade one (1), they would have stopped crying and became anxious to be in grade 1."*

The study found that teachers perceive school readiness assessments as highly effective in preparing learners for Grade One, as they not only track academic progress but also foster social-emotional adjustment, ensuring a smoother transition to formal schooling.

## Impact of Assessments on Teaching Practices

Participants also shared the impact of the assessments on teaching practice. Participant 2 FGD had this to share;

*"They significantly impact my teaching positively because they help me, for example, they help me improve in areas I did not do well. For example, if I did not teach well in Language and Literacy, I would go back and check myself and redo the lesson and probably change the teaching method if it is not working well with the learners. For example, if I was using teacher centered I would change to learner centered."*

Similarly, Participant 9 narrated;

*"I believe it is a good practice for preparing the learners. As a teacher am able to tell if the strategy am using is working well or not. For instance, when am teaching pre-mathematics and am using a certain methodology and when I realize that it is not working well I will change to something that will help the learners."*

The findings reveal that school readiness assessments serve as a reflective tool for teachers, enabling them to evaluate and adjust their instructional strategies. When assessments identify gaps in learning (e.g., language, literacy, or pre-mathematics), teachers shift from ineffective methods (e.g., teacher-centered approaches) to more learner-centered techniques, demonstrating a responsive and adaptive teaching practice that enhances learning outcomes.

### **Challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments**

The third objective of the study, focused on identifying the challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments, these include children's varying moods, over-enrollment and absenteeism, time constraints, inadequate teaching materials and limited classroom space.

#### **Children's Varying Moods**

Teachers noted that children's emotional states and moods greatly impact their participation in school readiness activities and assessments. The study found that varying moods of children on a given day can make it difficult to engage every child effectively, leading to inconsistent assessments. As narrated by the participants;

Participant 3 FGD

*"Sometimes children come with different moods at school. You can give a child to do this activity, the child would not want. Maybe you give that child another activity to do would want to do something else. Others would not want to mingle with friends and so on. And also not having enough learning space is a challenge because we cannot do some of the activities from inside classroom."*

Findings show that teachers struggle to maintain engagement with children who may be unwilling to participate or socialize, affecting the consistency and effectiveness of assessments. Emotional states such as reluctance to engage, isolation from peers, or mood changes on different days complicate the process.

#### **Over-enrollment and Absenteeism**

Over-enrollment and absenteeism were identified as major barriers to consistent and comprehensive school readiness assessments. Participants further shared that;

Participant 4 *"Over enrollment is of the challenges, the learners are many in the classroom against one teacher. Not having enough teachers and space to accommodate the learners. The other challenge is absenteeism. Today you teach this group, tomorrow you will have totally a different group all together. So this because a challenge when it comes to conducting assessment for school readiness."*

The study found that with large numbers of learners in a classroom and fluctuating attendance, teachers are unable to assess all learners uniformly or at the same time, impacting the quality and accuracy of the assessments.

#### **Time Constraints**

Time constraints were another key challenge identified in the study. Participant 5 indicated that:

*"The first challenges is Time, is not enough when it comes to conducting school readiness assessments. Also, the parents, when it comes to engage parents, they don't show up. I have difficulties with parents."*

It was established that teachers struggle to find enough time to conduct thorough school readiness assessments due to competing demands and lack of parental engagement.

### **Inadequate Teaching Materials and Limited Classroom Space**

The study found that inadequate teaching materials, cramped with classroom space further hinder teachers' ability to effectively conduct school readiness assessments. Participants stressed that limited resources make it difficult to provide an engaging and enriching environment for young learners, and overcrowded classrooms restrict opportunities for individual assessments. This was echoed by participant 1 during an FGD saying

*"The first challenge that I face is teachers' attitude, they don't understand what is involved in ECE. Secondly, I don't always have enough teaching and learning material to help me conduct school readiness assessments effectively. Materials like toys, enough crayons, learners' text books etc."*

In addition, Participant 3 FGD added that;

*"The other challenge is that we don't have a spacious classroom. As you can see this classroom we are currently using was used as an office. It's very small so the learners cannot write properly. The other challenge is over enrollment. As you know that the government has pronounced free education, and we have to enroll every child who comes to a place."*

The findings highlight that resource constraints such as insufficient teaching materials, inadequate classroom space, and over-enrollment due to free education policies severely impede effective school readiness assessments. These challenges not only limit teachers' ability to create an engaging learning environment but also restrict individualized attention, ultimately compromising assessment quality and early learning outcomes. Additionally, misconceptions about ECE among some teachers further exacerbate these difficulties, suggesting a need for better training and institutional support.

These environmental challenges further restrict the scope of assessments and prevent teachers from utilizing a diverse range of strategies for evaluating school readiness, as explained by the participants stating that ;

*"It is difficult to assess every learner on time. It takes time to conduct. When it comes to outdoor activities, it's a challenge because we don't have a play park and the space outside the classroom is small."* (Participant 9 FGD)

### **Suggestions for improvement by participants**

Participants emphasized the importance of having adequate space, appropriate learning materials, and physical infrastructure that promotes effective learning and engagement.

In this vein, HT-3 unveiled that,

*"I feel the strategies that we can implement are the learning corners because the child will be able to choose what they want to do. For example, a home corner, science corner, or language and literacy corner. So, a child will choose what they want to do, which can only be implemented if we have enough teaching and learning materials and spacious classrooms. And also, if we can have a play park, it can help so much."*

Another participant had this to say;

*"Having two teachers per class can be helpful because each learner will be attended to. If they can train the teachers more on the assessment tools, because some teachers lack that knowledge. Also, if they can provide a standalone classroom that is spacious, it would be good because most government schools have annexed classrooms, which some share with Grade 1."* (Participant 4).



The findings from participants highlight two critical requirements for effective early childhood education: adequate physical infrastructure and sufficient human resources. The factors directly enable child-centered learning approaches and individualized assessment both essential for quality school readiness programs. The emphasis on standalone ECE classrooms and teacher training underscores systemic gaps in current government school setups, where shared spaces and insufficient staffing hinder optimal implementation.

## DISCUSSION

The finding that most teachers in Choma District conduct school readiness assessments monthly and at the end of the year shows that teachers recognise the importance of regularly monitoring children's development. This is consistent with the recommendations of Brown et al. (2020), who emphasised that regular assessments are crucial for identifying and addressing developmental delays in young children. However, the teachers who conduct assessments annually may face challenges such as limited resources, high student-to-teacher ratios, or time constraints. Further, Roberts & Smith, (2022) also post that annual assessments may not offer the same depth of insight into a child's readiness for school as more frequent assessments.

The reliance on observations as the primary method of assessment indicates that many teachers in Choma prefer a hands-on, natural approach to understanding children's readiness for school. Observations allow teachers to watch how children interact, play, and engage in tasks, giving them a clearer picture of social and emotional readiness. Roberts and Smith (2022) supports this, showing that observational methods capture a broader range of behaviors and are particularly useful in early childhood settings. In Choma District, where access to advanced assessment tools may be limited, observations are likely the most accessible and practical method for teachers.

On the other hand, the use of standardised tests by teachers shows that some teachers in Choma District still rely on more structured methods to evaluate readiness. This is in line with the findings by (Lee et al., 2021), who stated that while standardised tests can provide measurable data, they may not fully reflect a child's overall development, especially in early childhood. In Choma, where children may come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, relying solely on standardised tests could overlook important aspects of a child's learning potential, such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are not easily measured by standardised formats.

The study found that the most commonly used tool for assessing physical development in school readiness among ECE teachers in Choma District is the motor skills checklist, coordination observation while others combine coordination observation with tools such as ICLAP and CDATZ. Additionally, other teachers use a combination of the motor skills checklist and coordination observation. The findings by James & Ndlovu, (2021) has supported the use of motor skills checklists in early childhood education, highlighting their effectiveness in identifying developmental delays early. This tool allows teachers in the district to systematically evaluate a child's ability to perform tasks like running, jumping, and using fine motor skills, such as holding a pencil.

The use of other tools, such as ZOCS Tablets and ICLAP, show that some teachers in Choma are incorporating technology into their assessments. This finding is in line with Roberts and Smith (2022), who stipulated that incorporating technology in early childhood assessments improves the accuracy and efficiency of assessments, especially in resource-constrained settings. These tools offer more standardised ways to measure social and emotional development, providing structured data that can complement observational methods. In Choma, however, the use of such tools is still limited, and expanding access to technological resources could enhance the overall assessment process.

The findings revealed that teachers in Choma District employ a mix of formative and summative assessment methods, such as monthly assessments, daily observations, and screening. These practices align with Social Constructivism theory, which emphasises the importance of continuous interaction and understanding of learners in their social contexts. For instance, teachers' preference for daily observations reflects Vygotsky's principle that learning occurs through active engagement and social interaction (Western Governors University, 2005). By observing learners interact with their environment and peers, teachers construct an

authentic understanding of children's developmental progress, which aligns with Vygotsky's belief that knowledge is socially co-constructed. However, the preference for monthly assessments demonstrates a tension with the theory's focus on ongoing, dynamic feedback, as the practical challenges of time and class sizes limit frequent, real-time interaction.

Regarding teacher perception on school readiness assessment, the findings show that all ECE teachers in Choma District view their school readiness assessments as effective or very effective. Teachers' positive perceptions suggest that the tools and practices in place meet their expectations in identifying children's readiness for school. These findings are in line with Kordich and Hughes (2020), who stated that when teachers believe in the effectiveness of their assessments, they are more likely to use them consistently and accurately. In Choma District, teachers reported using various methods, such as observational techniques, ICLAP tools, and interactive activities, which they find useful in evaluating different aspects of school readiness. This aligns with findings by Bennett et al. (2021), who showed that teachers who use structured and interactive assessment tools experience better outcomes in early childhood education.

These findings show that school readiness assessments in Choma District are perceived as having influence on teaching practices. This study therefore suggests that assessments play a crucial role in shaping how teachers plan and deliver their instruction. Teachers' experiences reflect that these assessments help them tailor their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of their learners. These findings are consistent with research by Perkins and Rosser (2020), who found that assessments can significantly impact teaching practices by providing teachers with valuable insights into students' learning needs. In Choma District, the use of various assessment tools like observations, ICLAP, and interactive activities likely contributes to this influence. Teachers use these assessments to adapt their teaching methods and address specific areas where learners may need additional support.

The study revealed a tension between teachers' recognition of assessments' instructional value and their predominant use of summative approaches, which contrasts with constructivist principles emphasizing ongoing, interaction-based formative assessment (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2018). Teachers' emphasis on outcomes, such as ensuring learners are ready to read and write, highlights a structured, product-focused approach. This contradicts the theory's principle that learning is an ongoing process shaped by dynamic interactions. Thus, while teachers' perceptions align with the theory's emphasis on holistic development, practical challenges restrict the implementation of continuous, socially mediated assessments.

Finally, the findings revealed multiple challenges, including over-enrollment, inadequate learning spaces, and children's varying moods, which hinder teachers' ability to conduct effective school readiness assessments. These practical constraints create dissonance with core Social Constructivist principles, as they limit opportunities for the meaningful social interactions and tailored scaffolding essential for supporting development within learners' Zones of Proximal Development (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2018). Similarly, time constraints limit opportunities for interactive and formative assessments, which are central to the constructivist approach. The lack of conducive learning environments undermines teachers' ability to observe and interact with learners naturally, which is critical for constructing an authentic understanding of readiness.

## CONCLUSION

This study found that school readiness assessments are integral to ECE practices. Methods such as screening, observation, and the use of standardized and teacher-made tools are aligned with curriculum objectives and developmental domains. These approaches provide a structured and dynamic means to evaluate children's readiness for Grade One, highlighting the importance of consistent and well-designed assessments. Further, ECE teachers view school readiness assessments as highly effective in preparing learners for Grade One, enabling them to develop essential skills like literacy, numeracy, and social interaction. Assessments positively impact teaching practices, allowing teachers to refine methods and address learners' unique needs. Teachers expressed confidence in using assessment results to improve strategies and foster children's developmental growth. However, teachers face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited space, absenteeism, and time constraints, which hinder effective assessment and learning outcomes. Environmental and infrastructural limitations, along with varying child behavior, further complicate the process, affecting teaching efficiency and

goal achievement.

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## Disclaimer

This paper is an excerpt from a master's thesis on teacher perceptions on school readiness assessment in Choma District Zambia. Otherwise, the authors wish to declare that they have no conflict interest.

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