Early Childhood Development teachers` perceptions of assessment of learners: A case of Mutare District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: The study investigated the teachers’ perceptions on assessing ECD learners. The main objective of the study was to establish how ECD teachers perceive assessment of learners. A qualitative approach was used. A multiple case study was adopted so as to develop information that is accurate and interpretable on assessment problems in ECD centres. Seven ECD teachers were purposively selected. Guided by the MacMillan theory, data was collected through document analysis, observation and semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed in themes that were derived from the research questions. The study depicted that teachers had negative perceptions on assessment in ECD. Teachers graduating from colleges were not fully equipped in terms of assessment. The study also revealed that teachers kept record books mostly because it was a national policy requirement without providing necessary details in the record books. Continuous staff development and appropriate deployment in classes were recommended in order to improve the teachers’ perceptions on ECD assessment.

Key words: Assessment, Early Childhood Development, Developmentally Appropriate practices, Perceptions

I. INTRODUCTION

The study investigated teachers’ perceptions on assessing ECD learners. In this case, teachers’ perceptions of assessment influence/affect how teachers assess learners at ECD level. According to Gardner and Galanouli (2016) teachers’ perceptions act as a framework through which a teacher views, interprets and interacts with the teaching environment. (OECD, 2013) state that research suggests that teacher perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment strongly influence how they teach and assess learners. Children are born with the innate nature of thriving to make sense of their world. They are naturally curious and above all, that is how they successfully grow. As such assessment is an integral part of the curriculum.

Dunphy (2010) posits that assessment can be considered a device that enhances the process of learning and development inside ECD settings. Adults play an integral role in facilitating growth of young children by giving them an enabling environment. The perception of assessment in ECD has moved beyond that of screening, diagnosis, and now encompasses answering questions about the child or providing information about classrooms as well as programmes (European Commission, 2012). This entails that data gathered from assessment is not only for the child’s developmental milestones but whether the environment is fostering or inhibiting development. Thus, the teacher is also part of this environment, inclusive of personal perceptions, hence, has a great influence on the assessment process.

II. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Provision of Early Childhood Development (ECD) has evolved from being a luxury or a prerogative for the whites and elite Zimbabwe to a basic right for every child (Manzunzu, 2020). Thus, ECD in Zimbabwe has evolved from being a luxury to a need. In 2005 the Government of Zimbabwe made it compulsory for all primary schools to have an ECD Centre (Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture [MOESAC], 2004). This has made early childhood education services accessible. The Government of Zimbabwe further took the initiative of training primary school teachers with specialization in Early Childhood Development through its various institutions like Teachers’ Colleges and Universities.

Assessment of early childhood learners has not been left out in these dynamics. Assessment of ECD learners is different from assessing older people. Children at this age can neither read nor write, hence, their assessment criteria should be different. It should be noted that the young developing learner presents different challenges that influence choice of assessment strategies. Assessment should be in line with mental, social and physical development of the learner. According to Bredekamp & Copple (2010) the purpose of assessment of young children is to collect information necessary to make important decisions about their developmental and educational needs.

Assessment has moved from a design of psychological tests to a wider structural design of educational assessment; from an act of conducting tests to a developmentally appropriate culture. Follari (2017) further stresses the importance of assessment strategies that are age and individually appropriate, culturally sensitive and ones that provide valid information readily usable for programme planning. Heritage (2010) states that assessment is one of the basic component of a curriculum. Thus, the paradigm shift in assessment dynamics plays a fundamental role on ECD teachers’ perceptions on assessment of learners.
The national syllabi for ECD were also developed in 2012 and revised in 2015 (MOESAC, 2012; 2015). They provided content on what is to be taught and methods of assessment to be employed. The national syllabi also set out the assessment criteria which can also be adapted to the environment in which the teacher is operating in. The Government of Zimbabwe further facilitated the success of the ECD programme by introducing a head start programme through the feeding programme (MOESAC, 2007). The programme would in turn facilitate inclusion of various stakeholders in the assessment of the ECD learners fostering total development. According to the SI 106 of 2005 Section 8, the Secretary, or any person who is authorized by the Secretary in writing may, at all reasonable times, visit and inspect any early childhood development centre and any other building or premises whatsoever at any early childhood development centre.

However, though these are efforts to enhance assessment, they seem to mainly focus on infrastructure development but the policy is silent on learner assessment.

Parents and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have also played a critical role in Zimbabwe to ensure success of the ECD programme. They have donated in cash and kind towards this noble cause. For instance, UNICEF has played a great role going as far as training Para-professional teachers. However, their efforts to capacitate teachers on learner assessment are subject to scrutiny.

Assessment has proved to be a vital part in education because it facilitates correct placement of the learner. Assessment must always serve in ways that enhance opportunities for optimal growth, development and learning (Follari, 2017). Koh and Tan (2012) assert that assessment has been found to be an effective method for the improvement of learners’ learning in schools.

Assessment helps learners mature and do self-assessment since teachers will be reporting back to them from time to time. According to European Commission (2011), assessment provides opportunities for independent practice. Teachers are expected to use assessment to guide effective decision-making, particularly with respect to identification, remediation or intervention where necessary. Lamprianou and Athanasou (2009, p. 22) connote that assessment is connected with the education goals of “diagnosis, prediction, placement, evaluation, selection, grading, guidance or administration.” To this end, assessment is a critical process that provides information about the effectiveness of teaching and the progress of students. It also clarifies what teachers expect from students. Thus, ECD assessment equips teachers with knowledge on how to assist learners develop holistically.

Classroom assessment is seen as helpful because it gives a more immediate measure of progress and achievement of learners; guides and improves instruction, diagnoses learners’ knowledge of a topic (Berry, 2011). However, at ECD, teachers should know that assessment is not confined to classroom activities or situations only but rather it takes place as a continuous process both inside and outside the classroom environment. Assessment provides day-to-day help with teaching and learning, which is the core and base for attaining excellence in education as well as school improvement (European Commission, 2012). It also helps teachers note weaknesses and strengths in their instruction and encourage them to continuously search for ways to improve their teaching.

It is a pre-requisite for ECD practitioners to be aware of what they are supposed to assess and know why they are assessing so as to fully benefit the learner. Though teachers are expected to be knowledgeable about their learner capabilities and using such knowledge to inform instructional practice, limitations in teachers’ assessment, knowledge and training are well documented (Kuh, Jownkowski, & Ikenberry (2014)).

The Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) (2006) studied continuous assessment practices of primary and junior secondary schools in Nigeria. The study revealed that teachers hardly used a variety of instruments such as tests, classwork, homework, projects, observations, questionnaires, anecdotal reports, checklists, rating scales inventory and practical exercises. Leicestershire Country Council (2010) also highlighted that assessment presented problems to teachers due to too many responsibilities on the teacher. In Zimbabwean farm schools, due to the high teacher-pupil ratio, it is rather difficult for teachers to adequately assess all learners. Thus, the child is disadvantaged under such circumstances.

Research carried out by Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) (2000) on using feedback from public examinations and teacher assessment to improve classroom teaching, revealed that high enrolment and scarcity of facilities in many public schools made it difficult to effectively carry out continuous assessment. Experiences at ECD in Zimbabwe have revealed that most practitioners concentrate on how much a learner can memorize rhymes and poems in English. Thus, other developmental milestones suffer and rote learning takes precedence.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (2005), revealed that lack of teachers’ expertise in assessment knowledge caused road blocks for evidence-based improvement of teaching and learning. Heritage (2010) suggests that primary school teachers tend to emphasize on quantity and presentation of work neglecting quality in relation to learning. Ndalichako’s (2004) research to understand assessment practices of primary school teachers in Tanzania revealed that, teachers relied heavily on traditional methods of assessment such as homework, tests, classroom exercises and quizzes.

Currently, there is a movement towards meaningful learning or authentic achievement and assessment (NAYEC, 2010; Follari, 2010). The Nziramasanga Commission (1999 p.261),
states that, “the area of early childhood development and education is a decisive area…” where foundation of the basic principles and philosophy of Zimbabwe’s education will be laid. This foundation can be strengthened by adopting Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) in assessing ECD learners. DAP is a very critical ingredient in the assessment of children at ECD. It is a way of assessment in ECD that seeks to understand where young children are in terms of learning and development. This means, teachers need to be knowledgeable on the children and enable them to achieve the goal (NAEYC, 2010).

DAP is more about doing things better – not “right” or “wrong”. DAP emphasizes three kinds of important knowledge for ECD teachers namely, knowing appropriate age, what is appropriate for each individual child and what is culturally appropriate (Koh and Tan, 2012). Inclusion of cultural appropriateness in assessment opens opportunities for ECD teachers to develop suitable assessment tools. DAP in assessment aligns well with the emergent curriculum which seeks to harness every opportunity in child’s development path.

All assessment practices must be age appropriate. Thus, teachers should be attuned to the children as unique individuals and be responsive to social and cultural contexts (NAEYC, 2010). DAP is not limited to the physical and psychological dimensions of development but to the social and contextual dimensions. The social and contextual dimensions include the child’s family, peers and the community from which assessment tools can be adapted to. Assessment in ECD, therefore, needs to be authentic.

The main thrust of authentic assessment is to ascertain if learners’ knowledge can be applied in their day-to-day lives. In the same vein, authentic assessment entails activities which can be direct models of the reality (Minnet, 2010). Authentic assessments go the extra mile from testing but familiarize the learner with real life situations and enable them to face challenges they may encounter in their day-to-day lives. Hence, authentic assessment enables learners to become socially fit intelligent individuals.

Authentic assessment should be done in a learner’s normal setting. This assessment should replicate everyday occurrence and associations. It should be conducted in known contexts and settings. Hence, ECD teachers are supposed to be on the lookout all the time, observing learners as they learn. Based on the above, assessment is a mammoth task according to the understanding of teachers. Teachers use various tools for assessment in ECD. These include developmental, environmental checklist, observation record book, child study, anecdotal and the social record book.

III. THE MACMILLAN THEORY

The study was guided by the MacMillan theory which is based on the idea that first-hand experience and active learning through free play with access to a wide variety of materials supports children’s development, learning and assessment (Minnet, 2010). The MacMillan theory values good health in terms of diet, activity and physical hygiene as essential to effective learning. It also encourages physical exercise, manual dexterity and emphasizes the importance of children playing outdoors (Bruce et al, 2010). These aspects remain important issues today, as there is deliberate effort to develop learners holistically.

To promote holistic development, assessment should be done targeting all developmental domains namely social, physical, emotional and the cognitive including health. To further enhance the development of learners, Macmillan established the open-airied nursery school which is a precursor to the current outdoor play area in ECD (Follari, 2017). The above, resonates closely with indigenous child rearing practices. They also highlight the importance of building good relationships with both children, and their parents advocating for close partnerships with parents. To achieve these outputs, importance is placed on training of staff.

The MacMillan theory has had an influence on ECD practices. For instance, the view that development of the whole child is enhanced through play is still a strong ECD underpinning principle. It is widely acknowledged that through play, children make sense of their world and apply what they know. Follari (2010) assert that for the MacMillan theory, the best opportunities for achievement lie in the domain of free play, with access to various materials. This allows for incidental learning which has seen development of the emergent curriculum as the world’s ECD best practice. Such curriculum provides teachers with opportunities to assess learners and take advantage of harnessing emerging developmental milestones so as to maximise development. These developmental milestones can be captured in the anecdotal record or the developmental checklist thus strengthening the position of authentic assessment in ECD. The belief that first-hand experience and active learning are of paramount importance is seen in ECD when children explore in their environment manipulating different materials (Minnet, 2010). Thus, ECD teachers need to have a positive view of assessment and be well versed in assessing various play activities for the maximum benefit of learners.

Assessment competences in ECD entails that the teacher is able to assess the learner in the five developmental domains namely social, physical, emotional, cognitive and health. Tosuncuoglu (2018) refers to competence as, “the ability to perform activities within an occupational area to the level of performance expected in employment.” Thus, an ECD teacher should be assessment literate, that is, the teacher should be able to assess all skills that are expected at ECD and make use of appropriate procedures for ECD learners. The most important approach to note is that ECD learners are assessed in their natural context. This natural context should be well prepared so that it is enabling for the learner.
Dunphy (2010) states that, “competence is the exhibition of specific behaviour and attitudes being demonstrated and distinguishable from the potential to perform.” Therefore, in ECD, teachers are supposed to act as expert caregivers and make sure they utilize tools of assessment accurately. These tools include developmental, environmental checklists, the anecdotal and the observational record book. The attitude of the teacher should also be convivial to learners so that they feel welcomed and comfortable thus displaying their true traits and temperaments, thereby facilitating conclusive and effective assessment. Teachers who are not well versed with assessment or assessment incompetent tend to be the source of problems in the ECD assessment process. Thus, for a teacher to be competent the teacher has to be assessment literate.

Bredekamp and Copple (2010) says that assessment literacy is, the possession of knowledge about the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including terminology; the techniques, familiarity of with standards quality of assessment and familiarity with alternative to traditional measurements of learning. Hence, ECD teachers are expected to be well versed with the language of ECD assessment. They are expected to be equipped with skills to assess, for what purpose and how. They should have knowledge of how children develop in all the developmental areas so that effective assessment is realized. By this, teachers should know what is likely to be exhibited by learners at a certain age or stage—that which is deemed ‘normal’. Hence, teachers will accurately assess ECD learners, advise responsible authorities and parents accordingly. It also empowers the teacher with vital information to make informed decisions to fully benefit the learner. Hence, it is a pre-requisite for the ECD teacher to be knowledgeable on all the five developmental domains and skills to be tested.

In the same vein, Berry (2011) argues that, assessment literacy equips teachers with competences to carry out assessment. It is vital that the teacher be well equipped with the language and skills of assessment in ECD so that learners are holistically developed. In support, Yambi and Yambi (2018) state that, “assessment comprises of two skills; the ability to gather dependable and quality information about learner achievement and the ability to use that information effectively to maximize learner achievement.” Assessment is vital to every teaching method. Thus, teachers should be well equipped for assessment upon graduating from Teachers Colleges and those in practice should be exposed to in-service training so that they gather enough knowledge on assessment of the ECD learner.

Learner assessment constitutes a number of problems in Zimbabwe at ECD level which might have been influenced by teachers’ perceptions. Experience has unveiled that teachers tend to have a casual approach towards assessment. Some teachers tend to concentrate on one developmental milestone when assessing while in most cases they concentrate on the one they fully understand in terms of assessment. They are most likely to turn a blind eye on the ones they do not understand. Teachers also have a tendency of bunching learners at ECD, and expecting learner developmental milestones to be uniform. Teachers also tend to be inconsiderate to the context they are operating from and also the background of the learner during assessment. Thus, inadequate assessment practices hinder effective decision-making as well as the teaching learning situations. This research consequently disentangles the teachers’ perceptions that influence their assessment practices. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

**Main research question**

How do ECD teachers perceive assessment of learners?

**Sub research questions**

1. What are teachers’ perceptions of learner assessment?
2. What are the ECD teachers’ assessment practices?
3. How can teachers’ perceptions of the assessment of learners be improved?

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative case study so as to develop information that is accurate and interpretable on assessment problems in ECD centers. The case study was preferred because of its suitability to the study, where aims and objectives seek to explore participants’ meanings as well as understandings of their social world. Further, the aim was to elucidate experiences and perspectives of ECD teachers. The qualitative approach is fitting because it accounts for the context and natural settings surrounding the study (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014).

A multiple case design enabled researchers to procure an abundance of information about assessment problems in Mutare District farm schools. Moreover, Mutare District is representative to other such areas in Zimbabwe because it represents other farm schools. The research aimed at comprehending teacher perceptions and problems they faced in terms of assessment. The research got an in-depth in assessment conceptualization, teacher perceptions, challenges and the impact it has on learners.

In this study, six ECD teachers from three schools were purposively sampled. Data collection methods included document analysis, observation and semi-structured interviews. Adoption of varied methods assisted in obtaining credible and trustworthy data. Document analysis was first done on ECD teachers’ record books to establish assessment trends. Document analysis was followed by observations later followed by semi-structured surveys which enabled an in-depth exploration of what was observed in the documents and classrooms. In the process of analyzing data, the researcher explored transcripts, took note of preliminary themes, and classified quotations according to themes. Quotations made
were discussed and an analytic comparison was made to reach at an interpretation and conclusion.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were presented and analysed in themes guided by research questions. Discussion on the findings from interviews, observations and document analysis is covered under the following themes: ECD teachers’ perceptions on assessment, ECD teachers’ assessment practices and improving ECD teachers’ perceptions on assessments.

Teachers’ perceptions on assessment

The study depicted that teachers had negative perceptions on assessment in ECD. Teachers graduating from Teachers Colleges were not fully equipped in terms of assessment. Teachers seem to be half-baked as far as assessment of ECD learners is concerned. Teachers indicated that soon after graduating, they struggled on assessment and some were still facing challenges. However, those taking further studies indicated that further studying had immensely benefited them in terms of assessment. Probing teacher assessment perceptions and Teacher 1 said,

As ECD teachers we lack assessment skills since at college our curriculum concentrated on us grasping pedagogies.

Teacher 3 cited that,

In my own opinion during training, assessment is not fully exploited and also colleges lacked ECD specialist lectures, personally I was never assessed by an ECD specialist lecturer during teaching practice and in most cases they exhibited ignorance on ECD assessment and procedures.

While Teacher 4 lamented,

We are using trial and error since we were not ECD trained.

These reveal lack of training in ECD which contributed to negative perceptions on ECD learner assessment. It indicates a sign of ignorance on the part of teachers since assessment is part of the pedagogies as teachers could have failed to grasp assessment at college.

Teachers also expressed that they had inadequate training on assessment of learners and also that, in most cases during teaching practice, they were assessed by lecturers who were not ECD specialists hence they did not benefit from it. Five out of seven participant teachers confirmed that there was little training on assessment and college and it was mainly theoretical. They also indicated that, even after training the ECD Department was still lagging behind in terms of in-service training on assessment and even staff development at school level. Thus, inadequate training and lack of skill in assessment has influenced teachers to have negative perceptions on assessment in ECD.

Inappropriate deployment of teachers into ECD classes also emerged as a challenge with none ECD specialists having to teach such classes. In the interview, Teacher 2 said that,

As an ECD teacher who trained to teach junior grades, I find it hard to assess ECD learners.

Teacher 4 also added,

Though I am teaching ECDB, I am not an ECD specialist and assessing these learners is a nightmare for me.

These responses reveal that teachers were fully aware and appreciate that they lack expertise in assessment. It also depicts that they appreciate the fact that assessment is contextual in ECD and individual-based as well. However, inappropriate deployment might be demotivated teachers and compromising assessment in ECD. Thus, misposting of teachers made them develop a negative perception on ECD learner assessment.

Based on the responses, it also came to the researchers’ attention that it seems Teachers Colleges are not fully equipping ECD teachers to some extent with assessment skills. Teachers had to learn through trial and error after graduating. In essence, all participants indicated that ECD teachers seemed to be not competent enough to carry out assessment. This confirms findings made by Gardner and Galanouli (2016) on practical assessment that, few teachers’ programmes provide adequate training for a wide array of assessment.

Teachers who took up further studies, echoed that in some universities ECD specialist lecturers were not easily available. Hence, the thrust of ECD assessment was not fully exploited during their studies. This also seems to worsen the problem on teacher competences in assessment.

Junior grade teachers practicing in ECD also pointed out that they did not really know what and how to assess ECD learners. They seemed not to be taking the initiative to research on assessment so as to empower themselves. It seemed they just shifted the blame in colleges and responsible authorities without looking closer at home. Teacher agency seems to be lacking as they appear to have no voice in the assessment process except taking instructions from powers that be.

Upon further probing on why it seemed teachers are uninterested in assessment. Reasons given were lack of motivation, poor remuneration, large class sizes and the degradation of the profession due to damaging perceptions by society. Further, unrealistic policies that are imposed on teachers, lack of proper infrastructure, and lack of resources to use were cited. Too many unnecessary records such as the Results Based Management Instrument (RBM) were also noted as constraining teachers to certain set standards. These constrained standards in most cases could not fit the ECD context in which one is operating from.

ECD teachers’ assessment practices

During the study, it emerged that teachers were assessing ECD learners differently. Some teachers were mostly focusing on learners’ abilities to speak in English at the expense of
other domains such as social, physical, emotional, health and cognitive development. Assessment of learners in these domains follow the principles of DAP (Bruce et al., 2010). The study established that ECD teachers also encountered difficulties in carrying out assessment because of too many records in the school. One teacher at one school lamented, *“Records are too many and in most cases there is duplication of information. Thus we spend most of our time updating records instead of preparing media and attending to other educational programmes that benefit the learner.”*

Upon analyzing the documents, it was established that the developmental checklist and the social record books ask for almost all the same details of the learner. Thus, teachers spend a precious time duplicating information in the two assessment instruments. It was also observed that teachers used anecdotal records, developmental checklists, social record and child study to assess learners’ development.

However, it was noted that teachers had challenges in stating anecdotes and they seemed to perceive them negatively. They only captured negative behavior such as soiling themselves without proffering some background to such behaviors. In addition, teachers only captured developmental milestones in the developmental checklist without making meaning out of them. The developmental checklist appeared more summative than authentic of formative.

Upon analyzing ECD learners’ developmental checklists, it was established that learners were being assessed on the same developmental milestones from first term up to the third term as well as in the two ECD classes. Reports lacked depth and order showing that assessment of ECD learners was not being effectively implemented. To make matters worse, Heads of Departments and school Heads even endorsed with their signatures such documents which were a clear indicator that they were still grey areas in terms of ECD assessment. Teachers showed ignorance while some pointed out that they had forwarded their concerns regarding instruments in question and were still waiting for a response. This clearly indicates that teachers were merely updating records and were demotivated.

However, as part of policy, record books were a necessity for each and every teacher at these schools. At one school, ECD A and B classes had Shona and English record books which were supposed to be handed in to the Head’s office fortnightly. Assessment procedures were not ECD material. Teachers were supposed to test learners object identification in both English and Shona. There was rigidity in the assessment process as children were supposed to only provide objective answers in the language asked. This clearly depicts how rigid assessment policies can be and how ignorance on ECD is affecting accurate and proper assessment procedures in ECD.

The study also ascertained, through document analysis, that some teachers could not make use of the anecdotal and the observation record accurately. According to Infants and Toddlers (2018), an anecdotal record (or anecdote) is like a short story that educators use to record a significant incident that they have observed. Researchers established that the anecdote was being utilized as the observation record book. When probed, participants highlighted that they just had to record something for administrative purposes. This further clarifies that ECD departments were being run by individuals who are not ECD specialists as they had knowledge gaps in assessing children at that level. Thus, the specialized training of teachers as advocated by Macmillan was observed as lacking compromising both teachers’ perceptions and resultant output on assessment.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, teachers appreciate the importance of assessing learners to establish how development is taking place but due to lack of cooperation and demands of various ECD stakeholders such as parents and school authorities they resorted to summative assessment. Lack of cooperation from stakeholders such as administrators is not in line with Macmillan’s idea of developing strong relationships between stakeholders to achieve holistic development of the learners.

Assessment policies were common in three schools but researchers established that they were archaic and did not meet the standards of ECD assessment. Thus, one can conclude that there are no standard procedure policies on ECD assessment in these schools. Assessment policies on the ground mostly affect ECD ‘A’ and ‘B’ classes. This, to some extent, confirms the recommendation by the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) which suggests that, assessment and accreditation at the end of training should include practical competence, good relationship with children and demonstrated responsibility in practice rather than mere theory. In addition to this ongoing professional development should take place in cluster meetings and workshops.

In the same vein, based on responses from participants, Teachers Colleges and schools were found not up to scratch on teacher training on assessment. The search further points out that teachers gain experience whilst in service since all subjects signified that experience was the best teacher. Participants further point out that ECD assessment had not been fully exploited at grassroots level. This was so because they were being led by leaders who are ignorant of the functions of ECD.

*Improving teachers’ perceptions on assessment*

It emerged that in-order to improve teachers’ perceptions on assessment in ECD; teachers should be involved in assessment policy formulation as well as with implementation. From the interview, Teacher 6 said,* For assessment to be successful, we should be consulted not just have record books thrown down to us.*

Teacher 7 added that
ECD assessment policies in school need to be improved and it is us the specialist teachers who should formulate them.

From teachers’ sentiments, it can be deduced that they need to be empowered by being afforded the opportunity to formulate assessment policies and tools to improve their perceptions on assessments. It also came out that continuous in-service training and staff development could improve teachers’ perceptions on assessment in ECD. Teacher 3 said,

*In-service training on assessment is needed so that we improve our performance.*

Teacher 4 also added that,

*Continuous staff development is needed for us to catch up with current trends and give us a positive attitude towards assessment.*

Thus, teachers generally agree on the need for continuous training which is key according to the Macmillan theory.

A suggestion by Berry (2011) that, policymakers or managers, for example, may need information that would help them reach a judgment about adequacy of student achievements generated in the system. Clearly, it indicates that policymakers are not really consulting implementers of assessment procedures. Due to high teacher-pupil ratio, teachers spend time testing learners on English and Shona reading sacrificing other developmental thereby defeating the purpose of assessment. Hence, in the end, ECD teachers are stuck with unproductive assessment procedures. It was also established that teachers were not being consulted when formulating school-based assessment policies. All teachers interviewed lamented that they were facing challenges implementing assessment policies. In the same vein Riley-Ayers (2014) suggests that, policy makers must engage stakeholders in making decisions, developing policy and providing important support such as professional development and ongoing technical assistance.

Teachers felt the integrated or thematic approach was more user friendly than the traditional subject-based approach. Due to the nature of ECD learning, repetition is inevitable so that learners can grasp the concepts in question. It also made easy to assess learners in their natural setting which is vital during this period. Teachers indicated that the thematic approach made assessment of large classes a bit easier. Due to the fact that one theme will be highlighted through all the learning areas at ECD.

Thematic instruction assumes students learn best when they can associate new information holistically with across the entire curriculum and with their own lives, experiences, and communities (Bredekamp & Copple, 2010 p.160).

**VI. CONCLUSION**

Teachers mainly assessed language development especially the grasping of second language which is English. This was mainly due to the pressure from various stakeholders, especially responsible authorities and parents. Lack of adequate and appropriate material in the play areas was another factor. Teachers shunned using outdoor play areas due to dilapidated state of the materials against the sizes of the classes. Play equipment such as swings are not enough thus it becomes a mammoth task for the teachers to effectively assess the children. Furthermore, pressure from administrators made teachers resort to cheating without really carrying assessment so as to meet the demands of the RBM.

Researchers also established that teachers felt they were overloaded due to high teacher pupil ratio forcing them to have too many unnecessary records to keep. Record books include co-curricular record book as well as duplication of information in the social record and the developmental checklist. Teachers mostly concentrated on summative assessment at the expense of diagnostic and formative assessment to give information to stakeholders. Thus, learners do not fully benefit from assessment. Teachers end up striving to please other stakeholders at the expense of the main stakeholder who is the child.

Researchers also established that teachers were at a deficit in terms of skills to carry out assessment in ECD centers. The deficiency was attributed to rather inadequate training on assessment and also lack of in-service as well as staff development on assessment. It was also established that due to misposting of junior trained teachers into ECD classes, they find it difficult to carry out assessment since they do not know what to and how to assess.

Challenges in implementing assessment policies are due to the fact that teachers do not contribute to the formulation of the policies which are in most cases rigid and inappropriate for the ECD level. Due to this, teachers had developed a negative attitude towards assessment.

Lack of resources for assessment hindered effective assessment. Outdoor play areas in a sorry state, indoor learning areas have limited resources, furniture is either inadequate or inappropriate as stipulated by the Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005. Thus, these shortages hinder effective assessment since they also play a role in the effective assessment of the learner.

**VII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Basing on the findings, the following recommendations were made that:

- Teachers Colleges and universities prepare ECD teachers fully for assessment so that upon graduating ECD teachers are fully knowledgeable and skilled. Thus, training institutions revisit their curriculum on training ECD teachers.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education priorities in-service training and staff development on assessment for practicing ECD teachers.
- School administrators through the Public Service Commission and the Ministry of Primary and
Secondary Education ascertain that ECD departments are led by ECD qualified personnel so as to avoid confusion.

- Schools and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education are encouraged to involve ECD teachers when formulating assessment policies.
- Schools are also encouraged to provide resources to consolidate staff development programmes in assessment.
- The Public Service Commission should also address the problem of large class sizes and misposts so as to improve assessment in ECD.
- Specialist teachers (ECD trained teachers) must be deployed to take up ECD classes so as to benefit the learners.

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