ABSTRACT

Objective. The primary purpose of this study was to document the nature of challenges faced by pre-primary teachers when delivering quality early childhood education at pre-primary schools in the Zambezi Region. The quality of delivery of early childhood education was assessed, and the main challenges identified included inadequate resources, lack of proper training, and insufficient support from policy makers. The results suggest that there is a need for improved infrastructure and better training programs to enhance the quality of early childhood education in Namibia.
education is crucial for the cognitive, emotional, physical and social wellbeing of children (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture [MEAC], 2016). The researcher envisaged that a high standard of delivery of early childhood education will potentially equip young children with skills and knowledge that will be important to their success during primary schooling. The study should prove essential for policy makers and other stakeholders to help them deliver early childhood education in pre-primary schools of a high standard in five schools that were purposefully selected for the study.

**Materials & Methods.** The case study collected qualitative data using face-to-face interviews with pre-primary teachers and junior primary heads of department. Observations were conducted in pre-primary classrooms during the lessons. In addition, the documents were reviewed, which included ministerial documents, journals and newspaper articles, to gather data that could be used to facilitate the improvement of early childhood education in pre-primary schools.

**Results.** The central question of study was: What are the challenges of quality delivery in early childhood education at the selected pre-primary schools? In order to answer this primary question, the following supporting questions were formulated: What are the challenges faced by pre-primary teachers in order to implement a curriculum that will provide quality early childhood education at the five schools in the Zambezi Region of Namibia? How does the classroom environment influence the delivery of quality early childhood education at the five selected pre-primary schools?

**Conclusions.** The findings of the research revealed that several challenges inhibit the quality of delivery of early childhood education at the five pre-primary schools selected for the study in the Zambezi Region. These challenges included: the use of SiLozi as a medium of instruction, a discrepancy between learning objectives as presented in teacher’s manual and in the curriculum, the lack of educational corners, the lack of teaching materials, the lack of recreational facilities and a deficiency in parental involvement in their children’s schooling.

**Key words:** early childhood education, pre-primary schools, pre-primary education, curriculum.

**Introduction**

This article presents the challenges to the quality of early childhood education delivery at pre-primary level, a case of five schools in Zambezi Region. It outlines the background of the study, the research question, the literature review, the research methodology, and the research findings and discussions.

Early childhood education (ECE) is education delivered in educational institutions like pre-primary schools to children aged six to eight years before they enter formal primary schools (Cascio, 2021).
Recently, heightened concerns have been expressed by the stakeholders in education (representatives from the private sector, civil society, development agencies and parents) in Namibia concerning the quality of pre-primary education (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2016). It is believed that this level of education is appropriately considered to be the crucial foundation stone. Developmental levels of education are built, e.g. social, cognitive and emotional skills.

Early childhood education is very crucial for the development of a child. A good early childhood education should prepare children for a more productive future, and higher quality of life. This quality life may translate to an overall economic growth for the country. For quality early childhood education to take place, all the stakeholders in education should promote a quality teaching and learning environment in pre-primary schools. Consequently, this research will benefit both teachers and children in the provision of quality early childhood education at the selected pre-primary schools in Zambezi Region. The researcher posits that children who are exposed to programmes that deliver quality early childhood education have an advantage over children who are exposed to poorly designed or poorly implemented early childhood education programmes or curricula.

**Research Question:** What are the challenges faced by pre-primary teachers in the implementation of an ECE curriculum that will provide quality education at the five pre-primary schools in the Zambezi Region of Namibia?

**Literature Review**

The theoretical framework of this research study was based on the “socio-cultural theory” advocated by L. Vygotsky (1978). The socio-cultural theory places emphasis on the interactions that occur among people as well as their culture. L. Vygotsky (1978) believed that everything is learned on two levels: firstly, through interaction with others, secondly, by integration into an individual’s mental structure. The gap in literature was that most research literature on the quality of early childhood education delivery at pre-primary level has been conducted in other countries, such as Nigeria. Whereas, not much research has been done on challenges to the quality of early childhood education delivery at pre-primary level in Zambezi Region.
Factors that Determine the Quality of Early Childhood Education

A person’s level of education determines not only their learning capacity but also the quality of human life itself. Education is the best long-term investment of any society. Quality may mean different things to different people, because it is a complex phenomenon. For instance, Houston (2007) highlights how teachers differ in their description of quality learning and teaching. Slot (2018) has also explained that quality in early childhood around the world differs because it is equally arranged differently. She explains that while in Nordic countries pre-school education is provided by the public sector, in other parts of the world it is provided by both the private and public sectors.

Workman and Ullrich (2017) have explained the components that are necessary to achieve and maintain high levels of quality in preprimary education. These factors include: Professional and stable teacher workforce, Effective leadership, Age-appropriate curriculum, Comprehensive family engagement activities, Multilevel continuous quality improvement system and Sustainable and sufficient set of funding mechanisms. Bondar et al. (2022) in their justification for the need of preservice preschool teacher training for the professional activity in the inclusive educational environment, have explained that pre-school teachers should be trained in “teaching and learning professional competencies, specific competencies in particular; creating and acting in the inclusive educational environment while working with children; performing non-standard professional tasks; and having efficacy to work in the inclusive environment” (Bondar et al., 2022: 163). Gobena (2020) has explained that preschool education programs are a prerequisite for helping children develop to their potential. According to him, “children who attend programs that meet high-quality standards are more likely to provide lasting benefits” (Gobena, 2020: 368). He outlined, small group sizes, high preschool teacher/student ratios, appropriate staff wages, well-trained staff, a curriculum geared specifically to young children, and parental involvement as other factors that can affect the quality of early childhood education.

Ensuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and the learning process at any level, including early childhood education, has become a prominent demand in Namibia. The government, children, various
Challenges to the Quality of Early Childhood Education...

industries and the community at large are expecting pre-primary schools to provide evidence of improvement in the quality in their activities, including the quality of teaching and its contribution towards the success in children’s outcomes (MEAC, 2011; Krause et al., 2012). When facilitating quality learning at the micro level, we need to be able to step back from the role of content provider, to assume the role of a person who guides discussions and the learning processes and encourages children to embrace diverse perspectives. It is also important to have a strong background in the content itself.

Challenges Faced by Pre-primary Teachers in Providing Quality Education

Ntumi (2016) explained that Teachers have an indisputable influence on the curriculum as the select and decide on what to teach. According to him, teachers who are characterized as motivated, responsible, and organized and are open to new learning opportunities, they were found to be high curriculum implementers. He concludes that teachers who do not have these attributes are considered as unmotivated.

The Challenge of Early Childhood Education Curriculum

According to Azzi-Lessing (2009), educational infrastructure provides the basis for the delivery of early childhood education. Deficiencies in infrastructure may trigger other problems in the implementation of the curriculum. In-service training provided by early childhood education officer (in Namibia, advisory teachers) is not sufficient to ensure that pre-primary school teachers keep abreast of current trends in the development of the ECE curriculum (Gundogan, 2002). According to that study, it was revealed that the kind of in-service training received by pre-primary school teachers was not from the field of early childhood education. Thus, the in-service training in which they participated might not have helped them answer their questions regarding curriculum implementation.

The Challenge of Overcrowded Pre-Primary Classrooms

Overpopulation describes a situation in which more children occupy a classroom than the available resources, teachers, infrastructure and instructional materials are able to accommodate. According to Olaleye et al. (2017), pre-primary teachers must fill several roles. These include imparting knowledge, ensuring a child’s physical and spiritual development, helping improve a child’s behavior, attending to a child’s
interests, and helping a child with personal problems. Olaleye et al. (2017) have explained that these roles cannot be effectively filled in an overcrowded classroom, because of an inherent limit in the number of children any teacher can effectively manage and supervise.

The Challenge of the Medium of Instruction in Early Childhood Education

Abidogun (2012) defines the concept of ‘mother tongue’ as “the language that a child acquires from birth and which becomes his or her natural tool of linguistic interaction” (Abidogun, 2012: 23). According to Nzwala (2015), mother tongue is someone’s basic language, the language used for communication in the home. Similarly, Phiri et al. (2013) states that the “mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction as it is the most used, because it has been the foundation of a child’s language experience”. A child’s mother tongue is the language that a child knows well and which she/he can best use to form sentences and express him or herself. “Children learn easily in their mother tongue because they easily identify with it, than they can with a foreign language” (Phiri et al., 2013). Furthermore, Phiri et al. (2013) say that “the mother tongue allows for proper social integration in schools and therefore helps to avoid maladjustment in children” (Phiri et al., 2013: 48). Moreover, research had proven beyond reasonable doubt that children learn most easily when they are highly proficient in their medium of instruction.

No Play-Based Learning in Pre-Primary Schools

Zosh (2017) defines agency as children’s initiative, decision-making and choice in play. Ultimately, play should involve some degree of agency, enabling children to assume an active role and to take ownership of their experiences. Equally important is for adults to recognize and trust children to be capable, autonomous, and agents of their own playful learning journeys. In Namibia, learning at pre-primary school level as specified by the National policy, should occur through play (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2016). Playing also requires accessibility to facilities and objects, such as toys, so that children can explore while playing. Moreover, the socialization of children occurs mainly through interaction with friends while playing. Unfortunately, Kayode (2014) observed that facilities for play are not always available to children.
Research Methodology

A case study research design and a qualitative research approach were used. The population consisted of 98 pre-primary schools, 85 pre-primary school teachers and 25 heads of departments in the Zambezi Region (Educational Management Information Systems [EMIS], 2020).

In this study, purposive sampling whereby the technique of expert sampling was used to select five pre-primary schools from the 98 pre-primary schools in the Zambezi Region. The sample of participants comprised ten pre-primary teachers and five heads of departments from 5 schools. Expert sampling technique was used in selecting pre-primary teachers and HODs.

Three methods were employed by the researchers to collect qualitative data:
(1) Face-to-face interviews with pre-primary teachers and heads of department.
(2) Non-participant observations
(3) Document review.

Data collection procedures were as follows: Face-to-face interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. Data was later transcribed. An observation schedule was set up to guide the observation process and written notes were taken during the observations. A document analysis guide was used to see whether the pre-primary teachers were able to interpret, comprehend and understand the syllabus, and whether lessons comprehended with the syllabus.

Data was analyzed as follows: To extract the emerging themes, the researcher read through raw data several times to ensure comprehension of the perceptions produced by the participants. Common trends were identified and categorized under the sub-questions. Robson (2002) points out that coding is the process of identifying and selecting texts or phrases which are meaningful and highlighting them, so that similar ideas are highlighted in the same manner, for example using the same colour to label the passages.

The idea behind coding was to facilitate the retrieval and categorization of texts that were associated with a similar thematic idea quickly, so that they could be examined collectively and comparisons or similarities made.
Research Findings and Discussion

(1) The Use of SiLozi as the Medium of Instruction
Learners were asked to identify which container was half, empty and full. Because the question had been posed in SiLozi without switching to English, most of the learners just looked at me. No one raised their hand to give an answer. (S2T2). Despite the fact that SiLozi is officially used as the language of instruction in Junior Primary schools in the Zambezi Region, not all children are familiar with SiLozi. Pre-primary school teachers find it difficult to offer early childhood education to children in SiLozi language simply because it is not the children’s mother tongue.

(2) Discrepancies in Learning Objectives Between Teachers’ Manuals and Those Carried in the Official Syllabus
For instance, there is a topic entitled ‘pencil grip’, but the activity for the topic describes using scissors to cut paper. We normally interchange unsuitable assessments and plan an activity in which children will be able to write their names using the correct pencil grip (S2H1). Pre-primary school teachers were often confused when attempting to select the most suitable learning objectives when planning and teaching the early childhood education curriculum.

Park (2008) in a study in Korea, with appreciation for the philosophy of the new curriculum, suggested that teachers’ understanding of the curricula is crucial for proper implementation.

Subject: Religious and Moral Education
Theme: My home
Topic: Morals

Table 1
Discrepancies in learning objectives between teachers’ manuals and syllabus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Teacher’s manual</th>
<th>Syllabus guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning objective(s)</td>
<td>Children will appreciate being cared for as the basis of becoming oneself and be a competent social member of the peer group. Page 78</td>
<td>Differentiate between good and bad and value the guidance from adults and peers. Be aware of rules and positive discipline. Page 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges Arising from Subject Content of the Curriculum

The policy states that during the first two weeks the teacher must teach the letter ‘A’, whereby talented children already know the ‘A’ sound and will be forced to experience a delay in learning other sounds (S2H1). The study revealed that the early childhood education curriculum did not cover a sufficient amount of themes or topic content. Consequently, pre-primary school teachers must either extend lessons or repeat the topics stipulated by the early childhood education curriculum in order to fill a week’s schedule of instruction.

Classroom Location

My pre-primary classroom is situated between two senior-grade classes. During the break-time of the senior learners, there will be too much noise and some of the pre-primary children lose concentration (S1T2). Some classrooms were also used as storerooms or were located near staff common rooms. Teaching and learning was affected due to continual distractions from other staff members at schools.

Lack of Educational Corners

According to S5T2, who said that she was disadvantaged because her classroom did not have educational corners due to a lack of space. However, in an inspired moment she decided to turn her personal table into an educational corner.

The socio-cultural theory is not being implemented, because there are no interest corners for social interactions between learners. The absence of these spaces and facilities prevented children from engaging in crucial individual and group activities in and outside the classroom.

Pre-primary school classrooms in which educational corners are provided and are readily accessible can benefit the children who interact with them (Watkins & Durant, 1992).

Lack of Teaching Materials and Recreational Facilities

For the officially designed curriculum to be fully implemented, the Ministry of Education should supply adequate resource materials, such as textbooks, teaching aids, and stationery (S3T2).

Pre-primary school teachers were not provided in adequate amounts with appropriate teaching and learning materials such as puzzles, abacuses and story books. This finding is similar to findings of Nakpodia and Achugbue (2012) in which they discovered that facilities for pre-primary education were also inadequate in Nigeria.
(7) Overcrowded Pre-Primary Classrooms

Overcrowding affects both me and the children because I cannot even move easily among them while teaching or helping children who need special help, such as the fast and the slow learners (S4T1).

The socio-cultural theory is being neglected, because the learners will not be able to interact well due to overcrowding. The five selected pre-primary schools were overwhelmed by the number of enrolments of children, which exceeded the recommended teacher-to-learner ratio of 1:25 (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2016).

(8) Lack of Parental Involvement

Parents were not involved in the learning process when their children frequently, or most of the time, did not complete the homework assigned in class. S5T1. The study revealed that a lack (in some cases) the absence of parental involvement created a challenge to teachers because teachers were not in a position to fulfil all the needs of pre-primary learners, whose learning processes require attention that extends well beyond the classroom environment. Keane (2007) states that parents’ levels of education can also pose as a barrier to involvement in their children’s achievements at school.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to find out the challenges faced by pre-primary teachers in the implementation of an ECE curriculum that provides quality education at the five pre-primary schools in the Zambezi Region of Namibia. The main finding of these challenges included: The use of SiLozi as the medium of instruction, discrepancies in learning objectives between teachers’ manuals and those carried in the official syllabus, challenges arising from subject content of the curriculum, classroom location, lack of educational corners, lack of teaching materials and recreational facilities, overcrowded pre-primary classrooms and lack of parental involvement. It will be of great support if the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, liaise with the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) and in a cooperative effort, amend the teacher manual and the early childhood education curriculum so that learning objectives are aligned. Educational Inspectors should also work with principals and teachers to address the other challenges presented above.
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ADHERENCE TO ETHICAL STANDARDS

**Ethics Declarations.** All ethical procedures were performed like getting the permission of the teachers who participated in the research, processing and analysis of the data, among others.

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**Author’s Contribution.** Gloria Chizimbo Mubiana: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis and investigation; Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing; David Nkengbeza: Resources, Supervision, reviewing and editing of the manuscript, verification, making sure that the manuscript meet the standard of the journal etc.

**Consent for publication.** The authors approve of this submission and, conditional upon the decision made by the editorial board from the peer-review process, consent to the publication of the current work. The work has not been, nor has it been submitted to other journals in consideration for publication.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Мета. Основна мета цього дослідження полягала в тому, щоб задокументувати характер викликів, з якими стикаються педагоги закладів дошкільної освіти під час надання якісної дошкільної освіти в дошкільних навчальних закладах регіону Замбезі. Якість надання дошкільної освіти має вирішальне значення для когнітивного, емоційного, фізичного та соціального благополуччя дітей (Міністерство освіти, мистецтв і культури [MEAC], 2016). Дослідник передбачав, що високий стандарт надання дошкільної освіти потенційно забезпечить дітей раннього віку навичками та знаннями, які будуть важливими для їхнього успіху під час навчання в початковій школі. Дослідження має стати важливим для політиків та інших зацікавлених сторін, щоб допомогти їм забезпечити високий рівень дошкільної освіти в п'яти закладах дошкільної освіти, які були цілеспрямовано відібрани для представленого у статті дослідження.

Матеріали та методи. У рамках тематичного дослідження було зібрано якісні дані за допомогою особистих інтерв'ю з вихователями закладів дошкільної освіти та завідувачами відділень молодших класів. Спостереження проводилися в дошкільних класах під час навчальних занять. Крім того, було проаналізовано документи, які включали міністерські документи, журнали та газетні статті, щоб зібрати дані, які можна було б використати для сприяння покращенню дошкільної освіти в закладах дошкільної освіти.

Результати. Центральним питанням дослідження було наступне: "Які виклики стоять на шляху забезпечення якості дошкільної освіти в обраних дошкільних навчальних закладах?". Для того, щоб відповісти на це основне питання, були сформульовані наступні допоміжні дослідницькі питання: "З якими викликами стикаються дошкільні педагоги, впроваджуючи навчальну програму, яка забезпечить якісну дошкільну освіту в п'яти школах регіону Замбезі в Намібії?", "Як середовище в групі впливає на надання якісної дошкільної освіти в п'яти обраних закладах дошкільної освіти?". Висновки. Результати дослідження показали, що якість надання дошкільної освіти в п'яти обраних для дослідження закладах дошкільної освіти регіону Замбезі стримується кількома проблемами. Ці проблеми включають: використання SiLozi як засобу навчання, розбіжність між навчальними цілями, представленням в посібнику для вчителів і в навчальній програмі, відсутність освітніх куточків, брак навчальних матеріалів, відсутність рекреаційних приміщень і недостатнє залучення батьків до навчання їхніх дітей.

Ключові слова: дошкільна освіта, заклади дошкільної освіти, дошкільна освіта, навчальна програма.