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Early Childhood Care and Education in Zambia: An Integral Part of Educational Provision?

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The field of international development has recently been consumed by a shift in contemporary educational discourse, one that moves Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) closer to the forefront of what is considered progressive policy formation. In Zambia, the current educational environment seems to indicate that the creation and continued development of ECCE programming may be premature and potentially damaging to an already tenuous primary school education system. This article aims to interrogate the call for ECCE programs in Zambia, using evidence from the existing situation in primary schools in the country as the basis, drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with 48 primary school teachers and headmasters. The authors, considering the implications of the current educational situation, question the unrestrained promotion of ECCE in Zambia, which has the potential to siphon funds from glaring needs already in existence within the educational system.

The field of international development has recently been consumed by a shift in contemporary educational discourse, one that moves Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) closer to the forefront of what is considered progressive policy formation. International aid agencies, such as the World Bank, WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, DfID and others (Freeman & Dooho, 2003), have promoted the creation and expansion of ECCE programs in developing nations, often relying on research from Northern nations as a means to form an “objective” theoretical foundation (Penn, 2004) in support of its advancement. Many developing nations, including Zambia, have been caught in this storm of educational policy reform and have, consequently, demonstrated a new commitment to educational provision for pre-primary students. While ECCE is ultimately a beneficial component of a child’s educational experience (Aidoo, 2006), a myriad of educational and contextual factors must be considered before governments leap into sweeping national educational reform. In the case of Zambia, the current educational environment seems to indicate that the creation and continued development of ECCE programming may be premature and potentially damaging to an already tenuous education system.

This article aims to interrogate the call for ECCE programs in Zambia, using evidence from the existing situation in primary schools across the country as the basis. The first section contains pertinent background information regarding Zambia’s educational history and policies. The second section draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 48 primary (grades 1-7) and basic (grades 1-9) school teachers and headmasters from both rural and urban areas. Publicly-funded ECCE is a relatively new concept in Zambia and it is, therefore, necessary to understand the primary schooling situation, as primary schooling has been free in Zambia since 2002 (Global Campaign for Education, 2004; Sampa, 2005) and is much more established than ECCE in general. The last section considers the implications of the current educational situation, as well as questions the unrestrained promotion of ECCE in Zambia.

ECCE Background and Policies

Zambia is a democratic republic located in Sub-Saharan Africa, having gained its independence in 1964 from Great Britain following forty years of direct rule by the British (Küster, 1999). Immediately after independence, the state government acquired almost total control of the educational system and quickly expanded it; the University of Zambia was opened in 1966 and during the next ten years, five new primary teacher-training colleges were opened (Carmody, 2004; Manchishi, 2004). The challenge faced by this newly independent government was to address the needs of children, as well as development demands of the whole country with very limited financial resources (Pence, 2004). Government leaders acknowledged the importance of educating the nation's children and in 1990, Zambia was a participant in the World Conference on Education for All held in Thailand and agreed to take the necessary steps to universalize primary education and reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade (Lungwangwa et al., 1999). Additionally, Zambia was among 190 countries that adopted the Millennium Development Goals and committed to meeting the goal of achieving universal primary education by the year 2015 (United Nations, 2005). These two events provide an international backdrop for the exploration of Early Childhood Care and Education in Zambia and its potential impact on the quality of life for young children in the country.

Early childhood education is, in theory, of great importance to the nation's Ministry of Education (MoE). Currently, under the MoE, educational provision is guided by the national education policy document, *Educating Our Future*, which focuses on equitable access to quality education at all levels (MoE, 1996). The Fifth National Development Plan 2006-2010, a policy paper outlining educational provision by the MoE, defines Early Childhood Care, Development and Education as the level of education, both informal and formal, which a child from birth to age six undergoes prior to reaching the compulsory age (seven years) of entry to a primary or basic school (MoE, 2006). This policy paper outlines critical strategies to develop a national Early Childhood Care, Development and Education curriculum framework and to produce and distribute teaching materials for early learners. Additionally, it states the need to develop monitoring and evaluation instruments for this level of education. Regarding the development of ECCE, it further notes major challenges in this sub-sector in past years: fragmented curriculum; lack of standards, monitoring and supervision; and the confinement of ECCE to pre-schooling instead of offering a more comprehensive learning experience (Kamerma, 2006).

The MoE states in its Strategic Plan 2003-2007 that Early Childhood Care and Education is an integral part of basic education, especially in the rural areas. Pre-schools are operated by local authorities, local communities, NGOs and private individuals (UNESCO, 2006). However, because education at this level is in the hands of private providers, financing of early childhood care and education has remained unclear. Home-based pre-schools in urban areas have mushroomed, albeit at the expense of quality education. It has been documented that much of the curricula of private pre-schools are outdated and inadequate for this age group and the home environments are not conducive to learning (UNESCO, 2006).

In a paper presented by Dr. Sichelwe Kasanda, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, at the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Dialog Meeting in Lusaka in 2006, the urgent need for a coherent policy in this area was outlined. Issues such as policy formulation, program implementation and sustainability were examined and the participants concluded that unless these issues are acted upon, it is unlikely that Early Childhood Care and Education policy will make a difference in the life of young Zambian children (Kasanda, 2006). Dr. Kasanda (2006) notes that the philosophical framework for increased early childhood care has already been laid

in the 1996 national policy on education and supplemented by the Educational Sector Advisory Group's proposed vision developed in 2005, which provides for an innovative life long Education For All Learners. According to Ministry officials, the broad philosophical goals are clear and encompass education that is linked from one level to another, from early childhood care through basic school and high school to university. Dr. Kasanda continues:

...every learner should have access to Early Childhood Care, Education and Development facilities by 2012 or there should at least be one caregiver to ten early learners by 2020. The targets set based on the available data would have to be prioritized and costed and a clear plan reflecting all programme elements put in place. Under normal conditions, this second level of policy formulation indicators would be judged as more credible than mere expressions of intent or aspirations. (Kasanda, 2006, p. 2)

The presentation states that exploration of this program needs to continue if a difference is going to occur in the lives of young children in Zambia. "It will have to be first and foremost, absorbed in the general education development policy framework and made part of a coherent, systematic, comprehensive and proactive development reality of Zambia" (Kasanda, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, coordination and collaboration across all levels and ministries in the government is essential for a strong and cohesive ECCE policy (Aidoo, 2006; UNICEF, 2008).

While the Early Childhood Care and Education program may have an important role to fulfill in the fabric of Zambian educational policy, it should not become an integral part of the education policy of Zambia until primary and basic schools in the nation develop and sustain an adequate learner-friendly environment. Zambia is committed to Education For All, an initiative to provide primary education for all school-aged children in the country and to reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade. There are currently overwhelming obstacles hindering the provision of primary school education and these issues must be adequately addressed prior to new programming being developed which has the potential to siphon funds from glaring needs already in existence within the educational system.

The premise of this article supports the obligation of the Zambian MoE to grant an unwavering commitment to educational provision at the primary and basic school level, acknowledging that government financial support is essential to further the program of educational reform. Government funding, even at a minimal level, is imperative to adequately support an ECCE program; however, since there are continuing severe shortages of funds for primary schools, it seems implausible to effectively promote an ECCE policy within the country at this time. A concerted effort by the MoE to effectively resolve the current concerns of teachers and administrators who are working in the educational field should occur prior to beginning new programs, which might also be inadequately funded. A closer examination of current, existing needs within the basic schools in Southern Zambia underscores the urgency of increased governmental support at this level before engaging in funding additional educational programs.

Existing Conditions

Many challenges inhibiting delivery of educational provision to primary school children are apparent in conversations with teachers and administrators who are currently teaching within the governmental school system. In 2006 and 2008, interviews were conducted with teachers in Southern Zambia and certain themes kept recurring, indicating common concerns about the current educational system. Because these interviews occurred at the end of a six-week teacher

training module, the headmasters and teachers were already well acquainted with the interviewer and were perhaps more honest in their responses because of this familiarity (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Repeatedly, respondents pointed to a set of challenges currently influencing educational quality and provision including, but not limited to, the following: lack of instructional materials, textbooks, and teacher manuals; over-enrolment of students; and a severe teacher shortage.

In response to an interview question regarding the major challenges facing teachers in Zambia, the most frequent response offered concerned the lack of vital instructional and learning materials:

The major challenges for teachers these days...we lack materials to be used. You find that you have a class of maybe fifty pupils against ten pupils' books. And at times you don't even have materials to use. Maybe you want to do charts, but no crayons, no paper. Everything you have to dip into your pocket, even with your meager income that you receive at the end of the month. (Teacher B2, personal communication, August 2, 2006)

Another Grade 9 teacher reiterated the same point:

Lack of materials and infrastructure. Currently, like at this school, we don't have enough classrooms. We need classrooms. That's why you'll find some students come at different times because we don't have enough rooms. We need more rooms. We don't have enough books. Teachers have to share books and we don't have modern equipment for teaching like overhead projectors. We don't have any overhead projector here. (Teacher C1, personal communication, August 4, 2006)

Lack of a sufficient number of textbooks is a recurring problem in most, if not all, primary and basic schools in Southern Zambia. Due to this lack of materials, one teacher struggled with the problem of engaging all students in the lesson:

Coming to the issue of lacking textbooks and so on materials, that discourages us more as teachers because if the class is overcrowded and there are less textbooks, you cannot attend to each and every pupil to say, because you can attend to two or three more, but what about those pupils who sit at the back? They also need to benefit. (Teacher D4, personal communication, July 16, 2008)

Indeed, if primary teachers are not able to plan lessons utilizing textbooks, it seems likely that ECCE programs will suffer from the same issues, possibly to a greater extent, as precious financial and material resources will be spread even thinner.

The lack of materials is not solely an issue for students. An insufficient number of teacher manuals is problematic for teachers, as well. Preparation for classes becomes a major task for most teachers, especially in the most rural areas where means of gathering information and conducting research are difficult at best, impossible at worst. One Deputy Head teacher noted the challenge for teachers to provide quality instruction sans teacher manuals:

You'll find that when a teacher's handbook is offered you find maybe one handbook has to be shared between three teachers. And who takes it home to go and prepare? So they have to leave it at school. And how do they prepare at home? So that becomes a problem, really. You have to make a time table to say,

'no, you take it this day and I will take it the next.' And so preparation becomes a bit difficult. But I would like a situation where a teacher has a handbook he can use. A teacher has all the other teaching resources that he or she can use. That way then their preparation would come very easy. (Deputy Head C, personal communication, August 4, 2006)

While it is claimed that ECCE has the potential to provide positive cognitive outcomes (UNICEF, 2008; UNESCO, 2006), it seems difficult to imagine that quality instruction and, therefore, cognitively challenging instruction, will occur in these dire educational environments.

Over-enrollment compounds the problems of inadequate materials and infrastructure. Class sizes continue to be large and teachers must frequently manage forty to fifty-five students in a class (UNESCO, 2006). An environmental science teacher for eight years commented "Grade 9 we have 65; Grade 8 we have 70" (Teacher B3, personal communication, August 2, 2006). A deputy head with 19 years of teaching experience commented "the major challenges, as I said, we are a developing country. Here, if you happen to go in a classroom, you'll find 50, 60. How does one teacher control all these?" (Deputy Head D, personal communication, August 3, 2006). A headmaster with 26 years of combined teaching and administrative experience commented:

Over-enrollment...the children are too many, there are too few schools and at the same time, the teachers are too few. So there is so much work for those that are in service at any given moment. I've never had a class that is less than forty-five. It's forty-five and above. And you can imagine if someone is teaching composition in any language and you have to mark those books almost on a daily basis. Pupils must see results every other day. It means the teacher will be so busy throughout. (Headmaster C, personal communication, August 4, 2006)

Additionally, a teacher at an urban school stated:

In such a case, you'll just try to at least to reach to each and every child, though it won't be possible. You'll find that you have 70 children in a class, so you just try, you just try your best for at least maybe three-fourth of the class to reach the level where you want them to be. Like on books, where books are not enough, as an expert teacher, you just need to be creative. Instead of depending on the book, maybe you just draw something on the charts because the books won't be enough to give each and every child, so I just draw something on the chart for everyone to understand what you wanted them to see from that particular book. (Teacher D5, personal communication, July 16, 2008)

Given the severity of over-crowding in Zambian schools, it seems unreasonable that international aid agencies highlight the benefits of ECCE, since they often utilize studies conducted in countries with pupil/teacher ratios between 4:1 and 10:1 as their basis (Penn, 2004).

Related to the problems of over-enrollment and large class size is the number of teachers who are employed by the government. The MoE is the sole employer for all teachers in public schools and several times a year a list of new teachers' postings is released, which states where a particular teacher has been posted, or assigned, for at least a two-year period. Location requests cannot be submitted and new teachers must sometimes travel long distances to their stated posting location.

One recurring theme in the interviews was the extended length of time for graduates of teacher training colleges to become posted by the MoE. Teachers usually wait two or three years until they are posted because there are insufficient funds in the education budget to hire the necessary number of teachers each year. Despite these known restrictions, students still attend teacher training colleges and desire to become teachers; there is no shortage of educators who are waiting to be posted. One deputy head commented on this situation:

When I was completing my training I got employed before my results were out. So by the time my results were out...by the time I got my diploma...I was already employed and teaching. But of late, the system has changed...two years, three years. Some have waited for three years. (Deputy Head A, personal communication, August 1, 2006)

One headmaster with 34 years of teaching experience has not seen a change in posting time:

It's getting worse and definitely impacting negatively on the teacher that comes because by the time he has come out to actually start work he has been off the line of teaching for three or four years... all the methods are forgotten. He's just as good as somebody that would have come from the street. That's how I look at it myself. When they're in college, they have a chance to maybe plan lessons for a short time, then they go away for a period of four years without ever writing a lesson plan. When they come back even the books that they were learning to use are no longer the ones that they use...these new books...so this teacher just comes as a new person. That's why they are finding it difficult to teach and they *are* finding it difficult to teach. (Headmaster D, personal communication, August 3, 2006)

One Grade 6 teacher commented, "I completed in 2002 and I started in 2005." (Teacher D1, personal communication, August 3, 2006). Teachers are, by necessity, waiting two or three years for their postings to basic schools. The vast majority of teachers and headmasters interviewed agreed that postings have been very slow during the 2000-2008 years. In spite of the desperate need for teachers to reduce student to teacher ratios in both rural and urban schools, a solution seems unattainable without the unwavering commitment of the MoE.

Teacher and administrator interview responses reveal grave concerns for the educational future of primary-aged children in the nation and provide a platform to inform national leaders of the urgency for renewed interest in educational provision. Although a key objective of the MoE is attainment of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, governmental leaders must chart and sustain a workable plan if they are to achieve primary education for all in Zambia. When asked if they thought government leaders were effectively pursuing this Millennium Goal, headmasters and teachers responded with obvious concern. A science teacher remarked "teaching is a good career. I've seen children who didn't know, now they know....gives me joy. And I'd wish the government invests more in them" (Teacher E2, personal communication, July 31, 2006). A very poignant comment was made by a headmaster who responded to a question about whether the government is making an effort to better the present educational situation.

I feel if they are putting effort, it's not enough, it's not enough. Honestly, it's not enough. They could do better, they could do better. They could definitely do better than that because I feel that we really need to sit down and look at our

priorities. It will get better, it will get better, but it will take some time and a lot of effort and it requires a lot of sacrifice from every one of us. (Headmaster D, personal communication, August 3, 2006)

This headmaster seems to raise the question, "How should Zambia invest its time, effort, and money?"

Implications

The premise of this article supports the concept of Education For All, including ECCE. However, funding of and support for established educational programs have been woefully inadequate, as evidenced by the interviews of people who are extremely familiar with the difficulties in government schools. How can new programs be successfully developed and sustained when a current crisis in the primary and basic schools exists? Much of the research used to support the promotion of ECCE has been grounded in studies from the United States, a drastically different educational environment, where significantly higher levels of resources and support exist (Penn, 2004). Even recent research from South Africa suggesting that merely one year of ECCE schooling can provide high returns for low investments (DfID, 2005) should be carefully evaluated, as South Africa is one of the wealthiest and most developed nations in Africa. The economic and cognitive returns of ECCE presume that the level of instruction is of high-quality, a rather large assumption to make for a nation like Zambia, where schools are over-crowded, under-funded, and under-staffed.

Educators within the Zambian educational context, some of whom are associated with the University of Zambia, have been calling for educational reform for several years (Hanyona, 2005; Kelly, 2000; Komakoma, 2003; Seshamani, 2001). These educators have the potential to provide particularly relevant recommendations, since they are intimately associated with the educational system in Zambia. Additionally, they have called for a genuine commitment to primary and basic school education on the part of the government that goes beyond a mere expression of words. These educators, as well as administrators and teachers in Southern Zambia, are appealing for a more intentional pledge by governmental leaders to enhance primary education. The authors of this article join in the plea for increased MoE determination to provide a meaningful education for all primary and basic school-aged children comprising a much smaller student to teacher ratios, an increased number of teachers, an adequate number of desks, chairs and textbooks per classroom and available essential resources such as maps, charts, markers, poster paper and pencils. Providing for these existing needs is imperative before embarking on creating a national program for ECCE.

A recent symposium held in Livingstone, Zambia, outlined expectations for increased investment in ECCE by national governments (UNICEF, 2008). Additionally, the EFA 2007 report lists several initiatives that would need to be instituted in order to launch a successful ECCE program, many of which would require government funds (UNESCO, 2006). Clearly, the establishment of an ECCE program would necessitate financial support from the MoE, funding which is desperately needed in the primary school sub-sector of education.

While ECCE is fundamentally a positive, research-based, educational agenda, this article highlights a circumstance where intentional aid agencies and the MoE have encouraged its implementation without adequately assessing Zambia's educational situation or considering the financial and pragmatic implications of its promotion. Is Zambia embracing the early childhood education reform movement before accurately evaluating the current educational provision to which

it is already committed? The authors of this article urge the educational leaders of Zambia to thoughtfully assess their commitment to primary and basic school education before adding more financial stress to an already strained educational budget. The educational accomplishments of the children of Zambia are at stake and their education is of paramount importance to the ongoing development of the nation.

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Note: Editorial Correction
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We correct an earlier version of this issue of *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, which had indicated an affiliation between Matthew A.M. Thomas (co-author of the article, "Early Childhood Care and Education in Zambia") and the Education Development Center. This version corrects this affiliation. The article does not represent the views of the Education Development Center.