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CONSTRUCTING A REFERENCE FRAMEWORK FOR ECEP EVALUATION: A CONSTRUCTIVE GROUNDED THEORY

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study, which is a thesis investigation, was to develop a reference framework that can help program staff to evaluate quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings. The study was approached with three questions. This paper presents the first question of the study that enables practitioners to understand what are the variables that best define quality in early childhood education. The grounded theory, design was approached to explore the experiences of 20 ECE experts in the field. The data analysis revealed eight main indicators, that are, holistic development, interactive teaching, trained practitioners, conducive learning environment, safe schools, responsive leadership, parental/community involvement, and child friendly policies as quality defining elements shared by the practitioners. The inference of the study will enable program agencies to ensure the implementation of these quality indicators in their programs.

Keywords: Early childhood education, quality in early childhood, quality in schools

JEL Classification: Z190

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Introduction

Early childhood refers to the period from conception to age eight. The significance of early childhood education (ECE) cannot be ignored considering the fact that investments in young children today will benefit the development in the future (Dahlberg & Moss, 2004). Attanadio, Maro and Vera-Hernandez (2013), Gorey (2001), Neuman and Wright (2010), Sonf, Zhu, Xia and Wu (2014) acknowledge the current reality that access to ECE is to be considered a top most priority, specifically for the developing and under developed countries where the state of child education is at risk. There are many agencies working to support this global agenda; however, the challenge is appropriately measuring the outcomes of the programs that have been planned and executed to serve the purpose (Burger, 2010; Dahlberg & Moss, 2004; Eleanor, 2013; Gorey, 2001; Haskins, 1989; Ting & Zhenmei, 2013). There are a number of elements involved in measuring outcomes of such intervention and seeing how far they benefit children's access, quality, and outreach to ECE and there is also a lack of periodic, internal and impact evaluation studies of the programs designed for early year education and care (Haskins, 1989; Neuman & Wright, 2010; Pugh & Duffy, 2013; Tickell, 2011).

According to UNICEF (2015), each day there are approximately 350,000 babies born in this world. Currently, approximately 17% of the population of the world comprises of young children between the ages of 0 – 8. Of these, around 65% of children are out of school in underdeveloped and developing nations. Considering these facts, ECE and development has been considered as one of the major items on the post 2015 agenda that was reserve in Sustainable development goal number four and with a specific focus on goal 4.2. There are several international agencies and joint ventures of nation state initiatives that are planning accessibility of early year education across the globe. Early childhood is considered to be the most significant period of development in the human lifespan (Perlman

& Fantuzzo, 2013). The early years of life set the direction of the future development of the child, its family and the nation. The better the child is, the better the possibility of improved socioeconomic growth of communities and nations. Children, if provided with care and education, tend to show better outcomes than the ones who are denied these basic rights. The amount of growth, changes and development taking place in a young child's life is enormous. This is one of the reasons that early childhood practitioners pay particular attention to interventions that support young children and their development.

Several research studies have shed light on the importance of investing in children and their development and the significant positive impact this has on overall human development outcomes (Gorey, 2001; Nores & Barnett, 2010; Ting & Zhenmei, 2013). Such investments have resulted in reduced poverty, lower crime rates and better economic development of nations (Attanadio, Maro & Vera-Hernandez, 2013; Sonf, Zhu, Xia & Wu, 2014). In addition to this, a good ECE program can make promising contributions towards the overall child development indicators since attending the ECE facility gives children an opportunity to encounter stimulating and responsive experiences that are different from which they get in their homes (Burger, 2010; Dahlberg & Moss, 2004; Eleanor, 2013; Gorey, 2001; Haskins, 1989; Ting & Zhenmei, 2013). This paper (a part of the actual study) presents the first question of the study that enables practitioners to understand what are the variables that best define quality early childhood education.

Literature Review

It is now believed that children learn twice as fast during their younger years (i.e. Ages three years and above) than during adolescence and that 90% of the brain is developed by the age of five (Mustard, & McCain, 1999). These findings bring to light the tremendous value of experiences that are provided for toddlers, and

highlight that these experiences play a pivotal role in determining the future of children, their families and society at large. To enrich these early experiences, ECE programs are designed and implemented. Education and care in early years lays the foundation stone for children's present development as well as their future progress. This implies that the experiences that children receive in the early years help them to grow and develop their cognitive, linguistic, psychomotor, and social skills. Quality experiences in the early years also help children to adjust as well balanced individuals in the society in general and school settings in particular. Moreover, ECCE helps students to develop conceptions of self-identity and a sense of well-being during their early years. They also develop certain dispositions that are essential for leading a better life, including appreciation and respect for diversity and equity. In short, quality early childhood programs help children to develop themselves to their maximum potential and harness their own creativity. Along with educational experiences, appropriate care must also be provided during these years to develop children holistically. A comprehensive program providing the elements of care and education will certainly develop children to prepare themselves for their lives ahead (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2013).

Traditionally, it was considered that parents, rather than the state are responsible for providing care and education in children's early years. These views were rooted in the belief that since women in their role as mothers do not work beyond the boundaries of their homes, they can better rear their own children and provide an enriching environment that leads to children's holistic development. Recent economic crises, as well as radical changes in societal norms and cultures have transformed this belief and advocated the need for Early Childhood Education (Essa, 2009). The growing need for Early Childhood Education is highlighted explicitly by a number of professionals, including economists, policy makers, educators, advocates, of children's rights and others. It is important to note that the advocacy for ECE is not done keeping in view the single aim of

child development; rather multiple aims have come into the limelight. Consequently, the possibility of provision of home-based care has reduced significantly (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). Reduction in the possibility of home-based care of young children calls for such programs that take care of children and also provide appropriate guidance and support by providing them with enriching educational experiences. The above mentioned characteristics of ECE programs make it exceptional. These programs are evaluated extensively by researchers. Research evidence highlights numerous positive impacts of good ECE programs for children specifically, and parents and society in general. The benefits of good quality ECE programs are defined by various researchers and scholars in the field.

There are many studies that advocate that literacy activities during the early years, improve reading skills of students at a later age (Arrow, 2010; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). It was also noticed that students who had developed their vocabulary at the age of three were found to be better performers at the age of nine and ten in vocabulary, syntax and reading comprehension related tests (Hart & Risley, 1995). It is, therefore, strongly advocated that early literacy activities such as storybook reading, mat-time reading, playing rhyming games, and memorization of nursery rhymes is to be used in ECE programs for the development of literacy skills (Arrow, 2010; Justice and Pullen, 2003; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). ECE programs could also use the power of 'play' in the development of reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary development, phonemic and so on. Epstein (2007) reiterates that literacy development can be augmented when children are engaged in playing games and exploring new materials, if provided with adequate peer and adult support. Conclusively, the aforementioned literacy activities during the early years make the ECE program more meaningful for children.

Purpose of the Research

Considering the significance of this crucial period and ensuring that all early childhood education programs are quality oriented, the question of what constitute quality in early childhood education programs. The purpose of this paper was set to explore experiences of ECE experts pertinent to the same.

Methodology

The qualitative constructive grounded theory was used to explore the experiences of the practitioners. The data were collected from twenty early childhood education experts using in depth interview technique by using open ended questions. The analysis of the data was done using manual thematic analysis. All the participants were asked to sign the informed consent form and were shared.

Results

Themes	N
Holistic Development	20
Interactive Teaching	14
Trained and Qualified Staff	20
Conducive Learning Environment	8
Accessible and Safe School Infrastructure	12
Parental Involvement	16
Responsive Leadership	10
Child Friendly Curriculum and Policies	8

Findings and Discussion

It is imperative to keep in consideration the quality indicators of any early childhood education program in accordance. Almost all the participants talked about indicators by defining basic minimum quality of some early years programs. According to them, these indicators and their in depth understanding will help the evaluators to establish a minimum criteria for evaluating programs and their quality. These indicators should be a part of any intervention and should be an integral part of the program assessment as well. Most of them mentioned that a few elements should be a definite part of any early year setting regardless of social, political, cultural or economic background. These quality indicators for early years education programs have also been highlighted by many scholars (Adler & Lorio, 2011; Adler & Lorio, 2013; Barnes, 2015; Bornstein, Britto, Nonoyama-Tarumi, Ota, Petrovic & Putnick, 2012; Bruce, 2012; Caruso & Fawcett, 2015; Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012; Hetherington, Lerner & Perimutter, 2013; Jeynes, 2012; Marjanen, 2012; Mindes & Jung, 2014; Stoel-Gammon, 2011; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011; Van Hoorn, Nourou, Scales & Alward, 2014). The following sub themes emerged from the findings:

Holistic Development

Almost all the participants talked about holistic development of young children. They asserted that all early year education programs should aim at providing an all-inclusive development approach with their interventions whereby a child's physical, social, cognitive and emotional development is enhanced. They also mentioned that a child's happiness is the central indicator for any ECE program. To this, Jennifer, one of the participants endorsed,

Basically, it would be how happy the child is to come to school. You know your classroom environment, the teacher-child interaction dynamics, what happens in that classroom

really defines the child. We talk about holistic development, but are it really holistic? I think we keep thinking we are doing holistic, but we only focus on cognitive and forget all about personal, social, emotional and spiritual basically all the other aspects of development. Then there are aspects of gender, which are totally ignored. [Jennifer]

Another respondent talked about early year education programs to include an element of creativity in it, whereby children are set free to experience learning around them. To this, Julie mentioned,

One of the indicators that I have is creativity, because early childhood education is all about encouraging expression through creativity and inspiration. That is the biggest indicator for me when I go into a classroom. After that comes talking to all the decision makers, teachers etc., but the first indicator for me is how well they understand learning. [Julie]

Interactive and Playful Teaching

Participants have shared that in early childhood classrooms there is a need for a play based learning methodology. According to most of the participants, young children should be engaged in activities that enhance their sensory stimulation and provides them with ample opportunities to interact with their peers and learning resources. Participants have used words like ‘*active learning*’; ‘*interactive play*’; ‘*play based learning*’; ‘*learning by doing*’; and ‘*learning in corners*’ to define the type of teaching and learning strategies which could be used in early year classrooms.

Trained and Qualified Staff

Teaching in the early years of life, according to most of them, requires a refined set of skills and demands mastery in dealing with the children, acquired from caregivers and practitioners. Participants of the current study have put in a lot of emphasis on the quality of teachers in ECE settings. To this, Gabrielle, one of the participants articulated,

Teachers should have a perfect essential kind of understanding for ECE . They should have a perfect understanding and should have taught all areas of ECE. They should be practitioners, rather than those who have just learned this theory. The first thing we should see when we are talking about ECE, is to evaluate the quality of the teacher. [Gabrielle]

A few of the participants also shared that recruitment in early year programs is not done very systemically, almost anyone and everyone is recruited whilst thinking that it is very easy to teach young kids. However, contradicting this, Prue, one of the participants asserted,

The people who are working with the kids have to make sure that the facilitators have at least a minimum education; a bachelor's degree in early childhood would be a minimum. This is so that they will have the requisite knowledge and skills and some practice to be able to work with young children. [Prue]

Conducive Learning Environment

Another important element mentioned by the participants was a constructive learning environment for young children. They

develop a great deal of learning if the environment is simulative, interactive, playful and full of rich learning resources. To this, one of the participants, Norma, asserted,

We talk about the classroom within the classroom where we have to see many things. For example, we have to see not only the visibility of the classroom, but the material in the classroom as well as the placement of the material in the classroom, because in early childhood classrooms we do not see material hanging on the wall where a child cannot reach. So it means the accessibility of the material to the early childhood student is very important in the classroom. [Norma]

Besides, spacing and learning resource placement is also a crucial element of an early years learning setup because if the child cannot access the learning materials, the true sense of it gets compromised.

Also, young children need space to walk, run about and enjoy a little freedom of movement. Their physical needs at this age include moving and walking. Hence, having spacious classrooms is also a plus point and should be assessed while evaluating the programs. To this one of the participants, Julie, recommended,

These days, as part of an ECE program, we need to see walking space for each student which is at least an area of 4 by 4. If this place is not sufficient, then don't expect miracles from the children. There should not be too much material on display, but just enough for students to use. Another important point is that the material should be non-toxic so students can handle it alone or under the supervision of a teacher. Therefore, it's important to consider all the areas of ECE. [Julie]

Other Related Indicators

The participants talked about various other indicators of the child, education programs that consisted of evaluating programs to ensure that they have child friendly policies, embedded opportunities for parental development and responsive leadership for supporting ECE in the schools. Participants talked about the significance of taking into account school infrastructure as well. A safe, protective and child friendly school infrastructure plays a great role in children's life. Most of the participants believed that school is a microcosm of society and children in schools and those who have graduated from schools, learn some very important life skills. In addition to this, children require ample outdoor space for playing. On this, Prue, one of the participants, defined,

The school is a safe place; boundaries, fences etc. make kids feel like they are safe. You have to ensure that the enclosures are not detrimental to them in any way. The space should be free of glass or sharp objects like that, as it can hurt a child while they are playing. [Prue]

Another important indicator, according to almost all the participants, was to evaluate if programs have features for parental involvement. A few of the participants have shared that without the support of the parents and their involvement in their child's education, any early childhood program would not produce desired outcomes. To confirm this, Monalisa, a participant, mentioned,

I think that the second thing a center can do is to hold parental workshops and so be on board when the child registers. You can have a parent workshop explaining what the philosophy of the school is, why this particular school has chosen this particular philosophy and respond to any questions that parents might have, in terms of what to do

when they take their kids home, what to do in terms of play, what to do at bedtime etc. [Monalisa]

Responsive leadership was another sub theme that emerged, used by quite a few participants. According to them, a responsive leadership that is willing to support early year education in the school is fundamental to the overall program intervention. Leaders in the school play a great role in overall educational development. They are also considered as gatekeepers for the community outreach programs.

In order to endorse this, one of the participants, Susan, explained,

In terms of management, one of the indicators is to make sure that you do have strong management, so that teachers will be supported. Teachers are not the one making the management decisions, as there has to be someone to oversee and respond to parents' questions and do the administrative work so that the teachers have the freedom to be able to work in the classroom with the children. [Susan]

Child friendly curriculum and policy a few of the participants mentioned that often these elements are not given very high importance, whereas these curriculums and policies are a few of the indicators that help programs to sustain in the future. One of the participants, Sophie, shared her experience,

You need a high quality research base curriculum, you need high quality professional development for your teachers that are on staff, you need support services provided for their family, and you need to be able to go in there and do an evaluation to see if it is indeed a high quality program. We need programs that are inclusive of and sensitive to the needs of different children and their needs. So, with regards to inclusion classrooms, it is

important to address social and cultural issues as well as issues that might be pertaining to special education needs of children. [Sophie]

Policies and curriculum, establish the actual philosophy of the program. If the program and policies are not in alignment, it becomes critically challenging to see programs' impact on the ground.

Conclusion

Collectively, the current research question guided the research investigation to develop a better understanding of the areas that determine the standard quality of any early childhood education program. Through this question, an understanding was established to understand what components should be considered for evaluation of education programs designed for young children. This is essential to the success of any program to provide basic quality orientation in education for young children. According to most of the participants, be it a resource efficient or constrained country, it does not change or modify the quality parameters of any early year education programs.

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