

Early Childhood Care and Education in Botswana: A Necessity That Is Accessible to Few Children*

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Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programs are essential because they boost children's perceptual, physical, mental, linguistic, emotional, social and intellectual development. Despite the benefits of ECCE, such programs are accessed by just a handful of children in the context of Botswana. Hence a majority of children who are eligible for ECCE programs tend to miss out on the benefits of such programs. The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, it provides brief background information about the development of ECCE in the country. Second, it discusses why and how little attention has been paid to ECCE in the country. Third, it highlights implications of excluding many children from ECCE. The author concludes by making several suggestions that could go a long way to ensure that children eligible for ECCE have access to ECCE programs of good quality.

Keywords: Early Childhood Care and Education; Children; Botswana

Introduction

Seventeen percent of children eligible for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Botswana have access to such programs (UNICEF 2007). This is so because the responsibility to provide ECCE programs lies largely with the private and civil society sectors rather than with the government¹. The government only provides an "enabling environment".

This enabling environment refers to:

- Setting standards to be adhered to by all who provide early childhood education;
- Supervision of pre-schools;
- Registration of pre-school units in the country;
- Training teachers for this level of education;
- Developing the curriculum;
- Establishing the Pre-School Development Committee to coordinate and advise the Ministry on the development of the program (Republic of Botswana, 2001).

The expectation is that once an enabling environment has been created, both access and quality of pre-primary education will improve. Government's philosophy of an enabling environment in essence means that pre-primary education is at this moment not a priority area. The "enabling environment" is created for private players, communities and non-governmental organizations so that they may lead the provision of ECCE.

*The words ECCE and pre-school education will be used interchangeably in the article to refer to all formal facilities offering baby care and pre-primary services in the country.

¹In 2006, the private sector ran 51% of the centers, the remaining half were owned by NGOs, churches, communities and local authorities/councils (Ministry of Education, 2006). This scenario also prevails in other countries (Saluja et al., 2002). It is also worth-noting that most ECCE centres in the country cater for children whose ages range from two and half upwards. Very few facilities cater for the zero to two and half (Bose, 2008).

This position, however, raises a number of questions, one of which is: What capacity and capability do these players have to provide ECCE such that the latter may play a significant role in improving access to ECCE and addressing rural-urban disparities? Private players do not establish their "businesses" with social goals high on their list of priorities. Instead they are concerned with generating profit. Where they choose to locate their centers is a function of business opportunities, supply and demand basically. Given the high fees they charge they are not accessible to many children from poor and low income backgrounds.

The purpose of this article is three-fold. First, it provides brief background information about the development of ECCE in the country. Second, it discusses why and how little attention has been paid to pre-school education in the country. Third, it highlights implications of excluding many children from ECCE. The author concludes by making several suggestions for the way forward.

Brief Background Information about the Development of ECCE in Botswana

Botswana is one of the African countries that have enjoyed a stable democracy. Since independence in 1966, the country has held free and fair elections every five years. Botswana has never experienced a civil war or the civil strife that has characterized the political turf in many African countries. Therefore, the peace and stability that prevails in the country in many ways provide a conducive environment for the promotion of children's rights, including the right to ECCE (Maundeni, 2010).

A brief overview of the history of ECCE programs in Botswana is crucial to assist in conceptualising issues that are dis-

cussed in this paper. Progress made to date will also be highlighted. The history of early childhood care and education in Botswana dates as far back as the 1960s. During that time, women in various parts of the country gathered children in their homes for custodial care while at the same time they taught them various activities that stimulated their development. The women were providing the service without pay. Complementing these efforts by women were various forms of day care centers, which were operated by voluntary organizations such as churches, the Red Cross and private individuals (UNESCO, 2000). With the passage of time, concern was raised that some of the schemes were not adequately run. It was at that time when UNICEF started to develop interest in ECCE in Botswana. Consequently in 1980, (14 years after Botswana attained independence), the National Day Care Centre Policy (NDCP) was developed (Republic of Botswana, 2001). The policy provided guidance in the:

“... management, protection and education for children of ages two and half to six years” (Ibid: 2).

As the years went by, there was a rapid increase in the number of women who participated in employment outside the home. Moreover, Government took a conscious decision to pay attention to women’s empowerment; hence women became active in productive economic activities more than ever before in the history of the country. This has heightened the need for ECCE provision. The economic boom also meant more disposable income, meaning that more and more people became eager to offer their children quality education. This drove the social demand for ECCE provision.

The need for ECCE programs has also been necessitated by modernization which brought with it the disintegration of the traditional social setup in which the extended family was the basic unit within which children were cared for and socialized. The rise of the nuclear family (in which both parents may be in employment) and the single-parent family (in which case the head of the family had to fend for the children) necessitated establishment of secondary institutions of socialization to play the role that was played by the extended family before. ECCE was a handy substitute.

The effects of these developments combined led to a mushrooming of pre-school centers which went by various names such as day care centers, nursery schools, crèches, pre-primary units, reception schools and kindergarten classes. As the demand for ECCE increased, issues that needed attention became complex and multifaceted. Therefore, the Day Care Center Policy of 1980 proved to be outdated as it ran short of addressing issues such as standards and regulations, training of teachers, curriculum development, and support of different types of programs such as children under the age of two years and community involvement or participation. This necessitated the formulation of the ECCE policy of 2001. The policy attempts to:

“Provide a holistic approach to developmental needs of a child, in particular its healthy growth and preparation for primary education.”

Its objectives are:

- To create an opportunity for the establishment and development of professionals in the field of ECCE;
- To develop care and education services for children so as to

promote opportunities for their full physical, cognitive, social, emotional and mental growth and stimulation;

- To increase opportunities for women to participate in social and economic activities;
- To identify the full potential for the ECCE program in promoting the rights of children by setting minimum requirements for providing services;
- To strengthen and support, through the ECCE services, a system of early identification and referral of children with developmental impediments’ (Ibid: 5).

The information provided so far indicates that the role of the government in ECCE is largely to provide an enabling environment to NGOs, churches and individuals that provide ECCE programs rather than to directly provide such programs. In other words, the government has not committed itself to universal provision of pre-primary education. To date, the responsibility of pre-school education has by and large been left to NGOs, churches, communities and the private sector. This trend is clearly captured in the following quotation which although was written in 1977, was still relevant in 2013—when this paper was written:

“government shall not ... make recommendations about organised preschool education, since we believe that it would be premature ... to think of making any major public effort in this field. Our general theme is that voluntary organizations and self-help groups should be encouraged to establish nursery schools ... if there is demand for them” (Ministry of Education, 1977: p. 56).

The same position appears in the following quote from the ECCE policy of 2001:

“... The supporting care and education services are provided by private individuals, communities, companies and volunteers” (Republic of Botswana, 2001: p. 2).

NGOs, faith-based organizations and other service providers are doing a commendable job; however, their efforts are hampered by shortage of funds. This obstacle worsened in the late 1990s when several international NGOs stopped funding some NGOs in Botswana under the contention that the country’s economy was doing relatively better than that of many African countries, therefore it was better to channel their resources to more needy countries (Moatshe, 2004). This move seriously affected some NGOs’ capacities to operate effectively as well as to expand services to rural and remote parts of the country. Consequently, many pre-school facilities are found in cities and big villages. In addition, some have been forced to increase prices in order to continue surviving. However, it should be noted that the fees charged by NGO-run nurseries and pre-schools are far less than those charged by the private sector. While acknowledging that preschool education has come a long way in Botswana, the author also argues that a lot still needs to be done.

Why Little Attention Has Been Paid to Pre-School Education in Botswana

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, only a small percentage of children eligible for ECCE programs have access to such programs because the government does not play a direct role in the provision of ECCE. Government’s decision to play an indirect role in ECCE may be partly attributed to the fact that al-

though Botswana is one of the numerous countries that ratified the two major treaties/conventions on children's rights, both treaties are silent on state parties' responsibilities to provide ECCE. In other words, the treaties do not explicitly make reference to children's right to pre-school education. For instance, article XI of the ACRWC states that:

"Every child shall have the right to education... States parties to the present charter shall take all appropriate measures with a view of achieving the full realization of this right and shall in particular: provide free and compulsory basic education, encourage the development of secondary education in its different forms and to progressively make it free and accessible to all; make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity and ability by every appropriate means; take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rate; take special measures in respect of female, gifted and disadvantaged children, to ensure equal access to education for all sections of the community...".

A second factor that contributes to government's indirect role in ECCE is shortage of funds (Discussions of the National Pre-School Development Committee², from 2004 to date). This reason has received mixed feelings from various corners with some people arguing that it is not a valid reason taking into account Botswana's economic performance compared to that of other African countries. On a related note, however, the government argues that it is already spending a lot of money on other public services such as those related to primary and secondary education, as well as health and social services; therefore, it cannot afford to spend on ECCE programs.

A third factor is the belief that caring for young children is a mother's job. This belief is closely related to the belief that a mother's place is in the home; therefore child care is the responsibility of women. Cultural beliefs that females/women are supposed to play a major role in child care and other household duties partly stem from the fact that from time immemorial Botswana men have been migrating to work in South African mines leaving women and children behind. Even when modern education was introduced in Botswana, males were the ones who were sent to school in large numbers. The elders believed that females did not need education because they would soon get married and then be taken care of by their husbands (UNDP, 2011). Consequently, some people believe that early childhood care programs erode the traditional role of the mother. Scepticisms based on the above view continue to prevail even though many women in Botswana work outside the home. This negates the government commitment of empowering women and shows that the country has a mountain to climb in relation to gender equality in Botswana.

The fourth factor that contributes to the inadequate attention that is given to preschool education in the country is scepticism about the economic justification for investment in early childhood education. Proponents of this view assert that money is better spent in upper levels of education than in pre-school education. They fail to recognise the benefits of pre-school

education and the fact that the child is a resource whose rightful support and education will shape the society of the future.

It should be noted that inadequate attention to ECCE is not only apparent in relation to programs, it also prevails in research. For instance, there is substantial literature on other groups of children in Botswana (cf. Dunne et al., 2005; Molokomme, 1991; Jacques, 1999; Montsi et al., 2001; Maundeni & Lopez, 2005; Maundeni, 2002) yet there is scanty research on children aged 0 - 6 years.

Implications

As alluded to earlier in the paper, most children who are eligible for ECCE in Botswana do not benefit from such programs. The key question that stakeholders have to ask themselves is "what are the implications of this trend?" The second key question is what are the implications of government's indirect role in ECCE?

Excluding many children from ECCE denies them the opportunity to reap the benefits of ECCE. One of them is improvement in children's intellectual development. Studies show that children who have received quality care and early educational opportunities perform better academically compared to those who have not had similar exposure. They possess prerequisite skills of learning and also adjust faster in standard one classes (Taiwo & Tyolo, 2002; Bigala, Seboni, & Monau, 1993; Otaala et al. 1982). Moreover, comprehensive ECCE promotes early stimulation—a phenomena that facilitates the detection of various disabilities at an early age amongst children. The fact that many children are excluded from ECCE programs in the country results in an increasing number of children who enter primary school with undetected special needs/disabilities when it is too late for intervention. They start primary schools ill prepared to learn and compete effectively with their counterparts who have been exposed to ECCE.

In addition, quality³ ECCE programs facilitate children's psycho-social, nutritional and health development. This is particularly so for children who come from underprivileged groups. Children's social development is facilitated in the sense that they are able to learn: to mix with other children and adults; how to behave in a respectful way with others as well as; to share, care for others as well as work out disagreements. Their emotional/psychological development is facilitated because they: learn about feelings and emotions; adjust to spending time away from their families; develop their independence and self-help skills; and they also experience a routine and a sense of security. Other benefits of ECCE programs include the promotion of language and physical development. In a nutshell, research has shown that quality ECCE services play a key role in breaking the inter-generational cycle of multiple disadvantages such as chronic under-nutrition, poor health, gender discrimination and low socio-economic status (The Bombay Community Public Trust, UN dated).

Institutionalised ECCE does not only benefit children, it also benefits other family members—particularly parents as it releases them from the chores of child minding so that they can also engage in income—generating socio-economic activities.

²The author of this paper is a member of the National Pre-school Development Committee. The committee is responsible for among other things advocating for issues relating to the development of pre-school education in Botswana. It comprises of stakeholders from various organizations including government ministries, research institutions, the private sector as well as NGOs.

³Quality aspects such as a healthy environment, stimulating activities and supportive caregivers are crucial to ensure holistic development in children.

Given that many households⁴ are now female-headed Moko-mane (2008), ECCE frees these women to join the labor market to fend for themselves and for their children. Therefore, ECCE promotes the empowerment of women.

Taking into account the benefits of ECCE, it is worth pointing out that in the context of Botswana, children who are excluded from formal ECCE programs are likely to be exposed to inadequate child care arrangements that put their wellbeing at risk. For example, in her study of women street vendors and childcare in Botswana, Mukamugambira (2001) found that children as young as 1 to 5 years accompanied their mothers daily to the street vending businesses. This exacerbated children's exposure to conditions such as asthma and influenza which resulted from the smoky, windy and dusty environments that some mothers operated under. Children were also exposed to harsh weather conditions such as excessive heat and rain. Similar findings were also noted by Sekgabo (2006) and Kgosisipula (2008).

Not only are these environments risky for children's health, they also affect mothers' performance in their businesses. When childcare is unavailable, unaffordable or of poor quality, parents feel less competent and less successful in their parenting, experience more stress and report reduced coping abilities. On the other hand, parents who are satisfied with their child care arrangements are more likely to be productive at work and less anxious about their children (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2003). Women can participate fully in social and economic development if they are ensured of quality services for their children.

Another example that shows how lack of comprehensive formal ECCE programs may put children's wellbeing at risk is that working mothers who earn low wages do not afford to hire committed domestic workers to look after their children while they are at work. Moreover, in households where helpers are employed, the helper/s is charged with numerous responsibilities that range from child care, cooking, washing, ironing, as well as cleaning the yard, the house and surrounding areas. Some maids are also responsible for dropping and collecting children from school as well as supervising children's homework. These duties are not only numerous, they are also overwhelming. Therefore, they may compromise the helper's ability to spend quality time with the children. Inadequate quality time spent with young children limits their cognitive, intellectual, social and psychological development. The conditions that maids work under may also contribute to child neglect and abuse. A study of care provided by working Botswana mothers to their children in Botswana found that most working mothers who earn low wages do not afford to send their children to ECCE programs; moreover, they leave home too early and come back too late to spend quality time with children. Therefore, they depend on non-institutionalized care, yet they expressed dissatisfaction about such arrangements. Such arrangements entailed leaving children with maids, relatives and neighbors. By and large, the mothers complained about unreliable maids who sometimes left their children alone, did not wash or feed them at proper times⁵, while others stated that their maids or relatives are adolescents and not experienced in child care (Morapedi, 1994). It is also worth-noting that by and large, there is neither formal child care training that is provided

to maids nor any rigorous screening that takes place before maids are employed to explore their past history particularly in relation to issues of child abuse and neglect. All these factors can put children at risk of neglect, abuse, infection or other health hazards.

The second key issue relates to implications of Government's indirect role in ECCE. This approach adversely affects the quality of pre-school education. For example, there is lack of capacity to ensure that pre schools comply with existing standards. Existing literature shows that some centres lack proper structures as evidenced by the absence of junior toilets⁶; some are overcrowded⁷; while others had limited facilities for children with special needs (UNESCO and Ministry of Education, 2009). Children with disabilities need extra love and protection because they are more vulnerable than their counterparts who do not have special needs. Some centres for children with special needs are unable to accommodate children due to lack of space, funds and skills. Consequently some children are identified at primary school when it is too late for intervention.

Quality is also compromised in the sense that some centres do not abide by the standards that are outlined in the ECCE policy. For example, standards relating to qualifications of teachers⁸, the ratio of staff to students, class room size, availability of basic education and developmental materials, hygiene and meals (UNESCO and Ministry of Education, 2009). Community-owned and to some extent non-governmental organizations-owned pre-school centers lack trained teachers, play, stimulation and developmental materials as well as some basic facilities, making it difficult for them to live up to the barest minimum requirements and standards stipulated in the ECCE Policy. The better resourced and better equipped centers were those that were privately owned, to which children of the poor had no access (Bar-On, 2004).

Way Forward

This paper has provided brief background information about the development of ECCE in the country. It has also analysed why ECCE programs have been given minimal attention, particularly by the government and lastly, it has outlined the implications of excluding many children from pre-school education as well as those of government's indirect role in pre-

⁵Advocates of attachment theory emphasise the need for a stable, consistent supportive and predictable environment in relation to the fulfilment of children's basic needs such as food. Therefore, caregivers who fail to meet children's needs adequately are likely to groom children who find it difficult to bond with or trust other people. Developmental psychologists argue that the relationship between the caregiver and the child influences child development and that certain experiences in infancy establish behaviour and personality patterns that are carried throughout life (Libert et al., 1986).

⁶A 2008 report by the Education Statistics Unit showed for example, that there were 863 adult toilets in ECCE centres and 1601 junior toilets.

⁷Children were overcrowded in some centres, hygiene standards were not observed and children's safety was compromised. Overcrowding led to poor hygiene and compromised children's safety. For example, in one centre children utilised a pit latrine, they went alone—unaccompanied by teachers. This placed their lives at risk of falling into the pit latrine (UNESCO and Ministry of Education, 2009).

⁸Almost half of the teachers in ECCE centers of Botswana are untrained. This should be taken seriously particularly that children are vulnerable and need proper care and education for appropriate learning. Most teachers who are trained work in private ECCE centers, while their counterparts who are untrained are over-concentrated in other centers (Bose, 2008). A 2009 study on ECCE revealed that almost all the teachers who participated in the study (including those who were trained) yearned for further training.

⁴The 1991 Botswana population and housing census data revealed that about 60 per cent of the women in the childbearing age range (i.e. 15 - 49 years) had never been married but bore children.

school education. The implications as discussed in this paper have far-reaching consequences for the development of children both in the short and long-run. Now attention focuses on the way forward.

It is important to re-iterate that over the years (even long before the world-wide recession); government has argued that it is not in a position to directly offer ECCE because of shortage of resources. With the on-going economic recession that has hit almost all countries, government's position is unlikely to change. The second factor that is influencing government's stand on the provision of ECCE is that it is already spending a considerable amount of money in the provision of educational, health and social services just to mention a few. Taking into account these dynamics, it would be unrealistic for the author to advocate that government should fully take over the provision of ECCE. Therefore, the following recommendations are made.

It is crucial that government should increase grants provided to centres that are owned and run by NGOS, churches and communities. As mentioned elsewhere in the paper, such facilities operate under severe financial constraints which affect the quality of services they provide. Moreover, because most available programs in the country are run privately and charge high fees, children of poor and low income parents do not have access to such programs. There is need to provide more community-based and other forms of ECCE facilities that are affordable and subsidised. This move will go a long way in improving access of ECCE programs to: children from poor families; those living in remote areas; as well as those with disabilities. Local authorities (councils) should assist communities to build ECCE facilities that target the above groups of children. Then communities could be sensitised about the benefits of ECCE⁹ as well as empowered with knowledge and skills to run such centres. The need for such training is necessitated by findings of previous research that shows that problems exist in the management of community owned centres.

In addition, the government should intensify monitoring and supervision to ensure that all centers in the country meet standards that are outlined in the ECCE policy. The responsibility to enforce the ECCE policy in Botswana lies with various stakeholders (education personnel, home economics officers, health inspectors, and health education and promotion officers). All these officers are not only responsible for ECCE alone, but have other duties that they are responsible for. This affects their availability for ECCE related duties. It is therefore recommended that professionals who are solely responsible for ECCE must be employed in councils.

An analysis of the early childhood care and education policy and programming in Botswana that was commissioned by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education in 2009 identified a number of barriers and gaps in the ECCE policy and implementation process. These include: resource constraints, particularly for community and NGO-based centres¹⁰; the problem of unqualified teachers¹¹, especially in community schools; a shortage of professionally trained personnel to enforce policy

⁹Previous studies have shown that some community members who live in rural and remote areas view ECCE centres as places where young children go for feeding purposes (Bar-On, 2004).

¹⁰The grant from government is too meagre and often not properly accounted for. Moreover, fees collected from parents are not enough to cover costs.

¹¹It is also important for the content of teacher training to be reviewed to ensure that it also pays attention to issues of children's rights, child development stages, and other pertinent issues that are relevant for ECCE.

implementation; overcrowding in some centres; absence of a national curriculum for ECCE¹²; as well as weak parents-teachers associations (PTAs). These and others factors need to be attended to as a matter of urgency if ever the ECCE Policy is to be of benefit to its intended recipients. Moreover, there is need to train informal child caregivers on basic child care knowledge and skills. This is particularly important taking into account findings stated elsewhere in the paper which show that maids and other informal caregivers sometimes fail to meet children's needs adequately.

Lastly, large scale research on care for children aged 0 - 6 in the country should be conducted to explore the reality, challenges as well as map the way forward. Most research on ECCE issues have focused on the capital city and surrounding areas because of lack of funds. Findings of such studies cannot be generalised to the whole country. Therefore, it is high-time that country wide studies are conducted. There is also need for research on issues of: children with disabilities who are eligible for ECCE; children from minority groups who are eligible for ECCE; as well as those who live in remote areas.

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¹²Centres have been left to their own devices to determine what to teach. Consequently, the principal aim of the centers/programs vary between enabling parents to go out to work, helping children to develop and school preparation. In small poor villages, the principal aim was to provide employment. In such villages, parents regarded ECCE mainly as a feeding scheme, as evidenced by the temporary withdrawal of the children when food was not available (Bar-On, 2004). It is however worth-noting that at the time of writing this paper, efforts were underway to develop the national curriculum.

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