Factors influencing early childhood development learners’ language literacy development: Teachers’ perspective in Zvishavane District

Esnath V. Mutandagai, Nomatter Manzunzu*, Joyce Maera
Department of Educational Foundations, Primary Education & Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe
*Corresponding Author: manzunzun@staff.msu.ac.zw

ABSTRACT
The research study focused on exploring factors influencing ECD learners’ language literacy development from the teachers’ perspective in Zvishavane district. The research study used interpretive paradigm because it believes everything is based on experience. Six ECD teachers of these two were Teachers- in- charge were purposively sampled. Data were generated using interviews and observation. Data were presented in narratives and analysed in themes. Findings from the research indicated that all the respondents gained knowledge on ECD learners’ literacy development through immense training. The perspectives of teachers vary among individuals, however, views expressed by the participants had a connotation of negativity and lack of provisions for the implementation of literacy tasks to ECD learners. It was also observed and confirmed that all visited schools lack provisions such as textbooks and infrastructure that is meant to develop ECD learners’ literacy development. The only observable provisions in visited classrooms were wall charts, reading cards and improvised libraries which as a result inspire boredom to ECD learners since there is nothing interesting to them. The study concludes that there is a great influence on environmental factors since they impel literacy development in ECD learners. The research recommends further studies on literacy development with ECD learners in a different town or community as this might not be affecting one district only. The research study can redirect teachers to approach literacy development in a more positive and robust way.

Key words: early childhood development; educational challenges; literacy; resource availability, teachers’ perspectives

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy is usually observed as one’s ability to read and write as well as an appreciation of signs and symbols (Unesco, 2024). Thus, literacy is very much associated with language development. Having a comprehensive background of literateness is thought of as very fundamental for young children to endure their educational as well as social lives. Berk (2017) propounds that literacy is generally taken the wrong way even among some teachers and other ordinary citizens which result in its full meaning and numerous benefits being lost. Literacy evolves with changes in technological developments as well as cultural communicative practices, so does definitions of literacy. However, literacy does not only occur in formal settings such as schools but it begins at home. As purported by Edwards (2019), young children are born with a predisposition for literacy acquisition and as a result development of literacy skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing begin in the home before the child enrols for Early Childhood Development (ECD). Denton (2019) points out that literacy begins the moment a child is born.
UNESCO (2014) asserts that literacy is one basic right that every human being has to acquire. Zimbabwe has made sure that this fundamental right has been fulfilled through the adoption of some legal frameworks such as Convention on the Rights of the Child, Education for All (EFA) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim at expanding Early Childhood Development. In Zimbabwe there is now universality access to basic education aiming at educational enhancement as well as educational equity. Before independence, early stimulation on literacy development was elusive since ECD was only accessed by minority and a prerogative of the rich and in the hands of private organisations. The Zimbabwean government later appreciated the essence of ECD for the optimum development of the child with literacy development becoming integral. Thus, research on various factors that assist in promoting the development of language in young children is fundamental in addressing the differences existing in young children from diverse racial, ethnic, economic and social background.

Hoff (2017), avers that young children are registered in schools with diverse stages of literacy abilities. Young children’s successive development, school accomplishments as well as literacy development are usually disturbed by different factors. A lot of children demonstrating interruptions at the beginning of their education most probably experiences being located in special education, experience grade retention as well as facing the risk of early educational complications, thus young children from impoverished families frequently show these postponements. Porche, Pattorn and Snow (2017) point out that most young children who come from low salary earning households fall behind their counterparts in the development of language at the beginning of ECD and also that their development rate is slower compared to those who come from prosperous backgrounds.

Studies that were conducted in UK, Netherlands as well as the USA on phonological awareness, print awareness and vocabulary indicated that what contributes more to learners’ literacy development is their interest (Odo, 2021; Milankov, Golubovia, Krstic & Golubovia 2021; Murnam, 2023). The studies showed the association amongst young learners and early literacy development. Lynch (2015), however, offers the opinion that ECD teachers ought to recompense special courtesy to certain activities that nurture unsurpassed chances for interest based learning. Activities such as storytelling, reciting poems and short rhymes may help children develop their literacy. Engaging ECD learners in different rhymes helps encourage initial literacy. It is therefore contrary to this background that the researcher pursues to discover factors influencing ECD learners’ literacy development from the teachers’ perspective so that early interventions are made to help ECD learners.

As stated by Gronkind (2016), many researches have been conducted and proved that young children’s literacy development is affected by many different factors and some causes are generally complicated. Chatterji (2016) carried a research on learners in America from preschool up to infant grade and the results showed that the reading anomaly in preschool learners was further attached to social and economic status than young learners’ sex. Research studies conducted in Malawi proved that medical, educational as well as issues from the environment may be considered as contributing factors that disturb the development of ECD learners’ literacy development. Chapman (2018) is of the view that hearing impairment can be considered as a matter which hugely affect the development of young children’s literacy since these children who experience hearing loss have difficulties in understanding words and speeches formed simply because these children cannot hear what has been said. This implies that there is need for parents and caregivers to be educated on the importance of having their children treated of ear infections and also give children correct doses as recommended by health personnel.

Research conducted in Botswana indicated that biological factors strongly influence ECD learners’ literacy development. According to Halpen (2016), boys and girls develop at a different cognitive rate as well as biological rate. Thus, girls seem to develop earlier than boys and because of this, researchers
characterise their early reading skills with part of this biological factor. It is also said that the ability to
learn to use language proffers an advantage to females from the early years of life.

In Zambia, research carried out pointed out that the development of language can also be affected
by various environmental issues which include multilingual environments. This results in some children
who are raised in multilingual environments experiencing interruptions in their development of language
or deprived language expertise. This means that if the mother at home speaks Tonga while the father
speaks Ndebele, the child may end up failing to interpret what some words mean. Parents ought to act as
good role models on ECD learners’ language development since parents are the primary teachers to their
children.

Literacy development in young learners is predicted through language development. Bloom (2018)
postulates that language development in young children encompasses understanding different concepts,
expression of relationships, emotional expression and increased word learning. Adding on to that
Beimiller and Boote (2016) assert that young children learn names of objects, events and relationship
between things. Beimiller and Boote (2016) further say young children usually begin exhibiting start signs
of the language used to classify objects during the age of four and also their vocabulary increases
depending on the quantity of words they come across every day. During this age ECD learners understand
the meaning of the story as well as showing storytelling skills. As purported by Beimiller and Boote (2016),
a child forms his or her knowledge basing on experiences, from the beginning of language learning as
well as early literacy. This implies that ECD teachers should expose their learners to a rich literacy
environment in order to enhance their language and literacy development.

Vocabulary development is one important skill ECD learners need in literacy because it assists the
ECD learners in understanding what they have read or listened to. Vocabulary is defined by Burg (2019) as
an assortment of words which are known and used by people. Additional vocabulary is acquired through
more fluent in reading and picture reading activities.

Phonological awareness is another important skill in the development of ECD learners’ literacy. Fray
and Fisher (2014) posit that phonological awareness is dividing into phonemic categories of phonemes.
For example, when reading the word ‘bag’, ECD learners are able to first say the sounds of the word ‘b-a-
g’. This means that ECD teachers should involve ECD learners deeply in language rich environments so
that they develop phonological awareness.

Children’s knowledge about print can also be a prediction of early literacy. The experiences that
ECD learners have with different prints significantly influence learners’ capability of understanding pictures
read. Fray and Fisher (2014) points out that understanding print also involves reading direction and where
to start reading a book. Top to bottom progression as well as left to right are skills that ECD learners learn
through interacting with print. This implies that ECD teachers should give their learners literacy curriculum
which includes reading every day and an environment full of purposeful print such as charts.

Knowledge of letters can also be used to enrich ECD children’s literacy development. According to
Nation and Snowling (2013), understanding alphabet letters at ECD level has a relationship with ECD
learners’ forthcoming interpretation capabilities and print awareness. Learners will associate word sound
and letter names to print. ECD teachers must therefore involve their learners in different activities and
games such as ‘pick the box’ which will assist ECD learners to have the knowledge on the letters of the
alphabet. Celano (2017) proposes that teaching space with play areas and numerous teaching actions
such as dramatic play area and theatre where learners would act out different stories read or heard,
promote hands-on learning. Such activities instil motivation as well as promote reading.
Research questions
1. Major Research Question
   In the bid to find out these factors, the researcher formulated the subsequent research question.
   What are the factors influencing ECD learners’ literacy development from the teachers’ perspective?
2. Sub research questions
   1. What factors are regarded by ECD teachers as influencing ECD learners’ literacy development?
   2. What challenges do ECD teachers face during implementation of literacy tasks to ECD learners?
   3. What alternative strategies can be used by teachers to enhance ECD learners’ literacy development in the classroom?

Literature Review
Literacy development is primarily influenced by environmental factors such as school environment, classroom management and school library. According to Fredrickson (2016), the higher the social and economic status structure of the school, the higher the learners’ literacy development.

A research conducted by Chapman (2020) at Rich schools’ cultural capital proved that providing pupils who have a variety of reading resources promotes an interest in reading. This coincides with the research which was conducted by the European Commission (2015) which also specifies the gap amid learners from diverse cultural backgrounds that may be bridged when schools have more resources. The research goes on to specify that pupils may access reading resources equally due to the accessibility of materials at the institution. This implies that how ECD practitioners deal with pupils has great impact on ECD learners’ literacy development.

Roskos and Newman (2019) define classroom management as methods or approaches applied by a teacher to keep a classroom setting which is favourable to learners’ successful education. On the same vein Ball (2017) alludes that classroom management includes learning interactions and behaviour of learners. Classroom management can therefore be viewed as a way which seeks to eliminate disturbing behaviour in order to permit better instructive emphasis that nurtures literacy development.

According to Celano (2017), a library is a primary source where additional teaching materials as well as controlled reading. This entails that a furnished and prearranged school library can justify a lot of purposes which include furnishing ECD teachers with a variety of books as well as microelectronic resources which help pupils follow their autonomous reading. As suggested by Sutton (2020), a library is associated with reading for pleasure and motivates learners to read and develop good reading habits.

A survey conducted in the United Kingdom under the motto ‘Book Start’ provided young learners a kick start in reading. In the programme, young children below the age of one were accorded a book upon going to a health centre with their mothers. The results from the pilot school indicated that these children outdid their aristocracies in their starting point of reading assessment tests. This coincides with a study conducted by Ware-Brazier (2019) which concluded that preschool learners who went to libraries located the face of a book which results in them knowing where to start reading not like those who did not go to the library.

A research conducted by Davison (2017) states the significance of home environment in promoting literacy development in learners since learners may have more and better opportunities at home. Research has proven that there is a strong association amid learner’s family background and his accomplishment in life. The learners’ language and reading ability as well as educational achievement especially during the early years is greatly affected by the family and home environment.

Bus (2015) establishes the positive link between the learners who come from higher income earning families and their reading abilities. Stanley (2018) made a comparison between rural and urban school communities and the findings showed that where the child comes has a role to play on learners’ reading
abilities because learners from poor families are more likely to lack the basic materials that propel literacy development. Davison (2017) settles that one’s living environment has a greater effect on their reading ability at school. He further stated that where the child lives influences how that child recognises himself or herself, shapes his or her aspirations, self-esteem and motivation. This means that the environment where the child comes from can either enhance or hinder learners’ literacy development. Hoff (2019) avers that some learners particularly those from poor economic areas are at risk of reading ability delays because the environments they come from do not facilitate reading practices at similar rates with their peers living in better economic situations. In addition, Arnold (2019) posits that parents’ education is highly associated with learners’ reading skills, cognitive and academic outcomes as parents’ higher level of education have a tendency of providing abundant materials, human resources and social skills for their children. Such parents are most probable to offer improved literacy environments to their children at home.

Denton (2019) postulates that learners from lacking places are at risk of social, cognitive and academic problems. Research conducted in Nigeria showed that learners from low income families delay than their peers in reading skills. They tend to develop their vocabulary four times slower than their counterparts from higher income families. Adding on, Denton (2019) argues that lower experiences in language is connected to low socio-economic status during early years. Arnold (2019) avers that early language skills contribute more to later literacy which later foretells academic results.

According to Lucchese (2018), learners who come from low income backgrounds or linguistically or culturally diverse might not have the type of literacy interactions that associate with school based reading achievement. A research carried by National Assessment of Educational Progress evidenced that learners who experience reading failure have a probability of coming from low income homes than those learners who come from higher income families. Parents from low incomes normally they rarely read to their children and let alone read for themselves. This means that if parents do not have necessary skills to provide literacy rich environments the result is their children lagging behind other learners of the same age.

The challenges faced during implementation of literacy tasks are inadequate resources and lack of parental involvement. Unavailability of resources greatly affects the total development of ECD learners. However, this contrasts the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) which specifies that the child’s education should be channelled towards promoting and developing the child’s physical and mental capabilities. Fredrickson (2016) offers the opinion that due to high learner-teacher ratios few resources in schools are usually outnumbered by learners which result in learners not having adequate resources for literacy development.

Overcrowding has a direct impact on learners’ performance as it diminishes the quality of teaching and learning of ECD learners’ literacy which has serious implications on the attainment of educational goals. Saracho (2020) points out that educators face challenges such as indiscipline and other behavioural problems when classes are overcrowded, thereby compromising the quality of literacy development. Lui (2014) is of the view that teaching many learners result in little or no access to learning resource materials which are dire to the development of reading skills and competences. High learner-teacher ratios in classes result in limited individualised attention which ECD learners need.

ECD learners’ literacy development can be enhanced by sharing information and developing ways of involving parents because lack of parental involvement can be a challenge to learners’ literacy development. A research conducted by Cassidy (2014) concluded that learners who always watch their parents read at home become effective in their early reading.
The research also showed that learners’ specific difference in individuals on language development and early literacy skills upon entering school have been accredited to the quantity and quality of language communications with their parents and acquaintance in their home environment. According to Anderson and Hiebet (2017), shared book reading is another way teachers and parents can help young learners acquire literacy skills. This means that reading aloud to young learners build knowledge required for eventual learner success.

If the parents have the knowledge on literacy they may help their children with phonics, picture reading, context clues as well as other word recognition techniques. Carter (2019) asserts that families begin occasions for their children to participate in language and print by networking and exhibiting with their children’s early literacy skills such as speaking, print awareness, and vocabulary as well as letter knowledge.

There are a number of strategies that a teacher can employ to enhance ECD learners’ literacy development such as developing a reading culture, fostering self-efficiency and the use of jolly phonics.

A research conducted on “No Child Left Behind”, Hedges and Gable (2016) meant to improve reading indicated that in spite of determinations and intensification in literacy backing, a lot of pupils strive to attain reading mastery at first grade level. Literature specified that belligerent readers fall behind their colleagues upon admission at school and remain behind schedule except effective involvement is put in place within the early years of their learning. This means that learners’ positive insights of reading are likely to have high self-esteem as well as self-efficiency. As a result, learners who lag back in reading may have low self-esteem and self-efficiency.

Hagans and Good (2019) are of the view that discovering a suitable and inventive way to improve young pupils’ literacy is no easy thing to do. However, Morrow (2017) is of the view that one of the most effective strategies that ECD teachers can use to enhance ECD children’s literacy skills is through jolly phonics. According to Loyd (2020), jolly phonics is a comprehensive basis for comprehension as well as writing which uses the artificial phonetic approach to teaching sounds of letters in a manner which is interesting, multi-sensory and fun. ECD teachers should need to have teaching styles for each learner as some of them struggle to express themselves in reading and writing. According to Hagans and Good (2019), struggling readers experience a division in oral language, printed language and word meanings as a result they lag behind their classmates who are fluent in reading.

2. METHODS

In order to find factors influencing ECD learners’ literacy development, the study adopted an interpretive qualitative case study approach to direct this study. As purported by Creswell (2019), an interpretive qualitative research approach is an approach on understanding the phenomena and making meaning which is under study in its natural form. On the same note, Kothari (2019) argues that qualitative research aims at understanding some aspects of social life. Silverman (2019) offers the opinion that qualitative research approach yields conclusions attained using a naturalistic approach to its subject matter.

The study also adopted the case study design. Schutt (2019) argues that a case study is a rigorous, systematic investigation of an individual, group or community where the researcher observes facts linking to a lot of modifiablies. The researcher based on the case study research design it will help in exploring issues surrounding literacy development within ECD learners at selected schools. For the purpose of this study the teachers were purposively sampled from two schools in Zvishavane urban cluster. The schools were purposively sampled to represent different demographic populations from both low and high density areas. This sampling would assist in generating data representative of different social classes.

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sample of six ECD teachers, of these, two were Teachers- in- charge from the two schools was drawn. Marshall and Rossman (2017) offer the opinion that observation is a data collection method where the participants are not questioned directly and it also involves taking note of non-verbal behaviours and taking down notes. The researchers used observations in areas that need to be observed so not to lose focus to the needs of the research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section was dedicated on presenting data, analyzing data and discussing collected data in relation to factors influencing ECD learners’ literacy development from the teachers’ perspective in Zvishavane district. Observations and interviews were used by the researcher to acquire as much data needed for this research study. Discussion of data followed the topical issues that sought to address research questions since they are the major determinants that guided the process of generating data in the field of study. Data were presented in the following themes:

a) Factors viewed by teachers as influencing ECD learners’ literacy development
b) Challenges faced by ECD teachers during the implementation of literacy tasks to ECD learners.
c) Alternative strategies that can be used by teachers to enhance ECD learners’ literacy development.

1. Factors viewed by teachers as influencing ECD learners’ literacy development

Details of findings on factors viewed by ECD teachers as influencing ECD learners’ literacy development notwithstanding the role of the environment for example the school environment, classroom management and the school library were the major determinants of literacy development.

From the submissions made by the teachers in charge through the interviews, factors that influence ECD learners’ literacy development in schools include learners’ family background. Teacher in charge 1 said, I can also say schools should bridge the gap between learners from poor backgrounds and those from affluent families as they will have same access to resources due to the obtainability of reading materials. Teacher in charge 2 added, involving parents in their children’s literacy practices have the greatest influence on their children as they will support with the necessary requirements that promote their literacy development.

The study revealed that availability of reading materials and library is a major factor influencing ECD learners’ literacy development. This finding was vindicated by teacher 2 who said, schools should have libraries were learners can read on their own. I strongly believe that a library with a variety of reading materials motivates learners to read and as a result they develop good reading habits. Teacher in charge 1 corroborated, environmental factors influence ECD learners’ literacy development either way. This means that the school environment needs to be conducive for learners to develop their literacy.

Another finding was that, involvement of parents in their children’s education has an impact on ECD learners’ literacy development. This finding was validated by teacher 4 who asserted, where the child comes from has a greater part in developing their literacy. This means that how parents value their children’s reading matters most as they will promote their children’s literacy since they are said to be best teachers of their children.

Deductions from responses given by Teachers in Charge during the interviews indicated that the number of learners in a class has a great influence on literacy development.

Sentiments expressed by Teachers in Charge were that ECD classrooms should not be overcrowded but be manageable so that teachers can execute literacy tasks effectively. Teacher in Charge 1 said, schools should have well manageable classrooms which are not overcrowded as this will help ECD teachers have space to set up play areas were learners engage in different activities such as dramatic play which
promote listening, reading, speaking and writing. Teacher 5 added, classrooms should provide ECD learners with a variety of reading materials so as to promote their interest in reading and writing.

Thus, from the interviews, classrooms should have a wide range of reading materials and these can only be found in form of charts, mobiles and library corner. These responses indicated that if classrooms are well equipped, learners can have time to read on their own.

2. Challenges faced by ECD teachers during the implementation of literacy tasks to ECD learners.

From the study it emerged that inadequate resources and lack of parental involvement were the major challenges in literacy programmes for ECD learners. It was observed that schools did not have equipped libraries and in some cases old and torn text books were observed in the classrooms. This also resulted in a very high pupil-text book ratio. The observations were corroborated by teachers in charge responses in the interviews. Teacher in charge 1 said, the status of our school with regards to reading resources is mere rhetoric as the school lack essential reading resources such as textbooks in most learning areas since textbooks facilitates literacy skills in ECD learners. Teacher in Charge 1 added, the state of reading resources is very worrisome as there are very few reading materials which are usually outnumbered by high learner-text ratios which prevail in most ECD learners.

Responding to challenges faced by ECD teachers during execution of literacy tasks, respondents had this to say:

Asked on how the status of their schools were like pertaining reading resources, teachers’ responses were expressed as follows:

The study revealed that, inadequate reading materials hindered ECD learners’ literacy development. Teacher in charge 1 said, inadequate reading materials has become a major challenge at our school. Textbooks are very few in ECD classrooms. Due to this reason, the few available textbooks cannot be shared equally among ECD learners due to their large numbers in classrooms.

From the study it was confirmed that lack of appropriate infrastructure affected literacy development among ECD learners. to validate the finding, teacher in charge 2 asserted, my school lack infrastructural resources as a result ECD learners use storerooms as their classrooms due to lack of classroom blocks. This becomes a big challenge to teachers when executing literacy tasks since they cannot set spacious play areas due to limited space. Learners will be crowded as a result activities such as drama will be difficult to execute.

During the study it was revealed that, lack of parental involvement was hindering literacy development among ECD learners. To support this teacher in Charge 1 said, not all parents are cooperative and supportive when it comes to their children’s literacy development. Most of them do not attend school meetings, let alone their children’s literacy programmes. To buttress the idea of lack of parental involvement in literacy development, teacher in Charge 2 asserted, whilst ECD teachers give learners homework every time some parents are assisting them. Corroborating the idea, Teacher in charge 3 added, lack of parental involvement is one challenge that ECD teachers at my school face because very few parents involve themselves in their children’s literacy activities. I can say economic activities to sustain livelihoods entail that most parents rarely spare time to commit themselves to ECD learners’ literacy programmes at school.

From the above assertions, the status of reading resources in schools is pathetic. It ranges from scarcity to torn textbooks. This problem has been exacerbated by high teacher-pupil ratios in ECD classrooms. The researchers intensely depended on observations to see resources found in schools that promote the development of literacy in ECD learners. The researchers observed that the selected schools had very few resources such as textbooks and ICT tools that drive literacy development among ECD learners. However, the researchers noted that teachers tried as much as possible to be innovative and
come up with improvised libraries as well as wall charts with meaningful pictures on them. Reading cards and work cards were also observed in different corners of the classrooms for learners to use during literacy tasks.

Findings from observations made indicated that not all parents involved themselves in developing their children’s literacy since the researchers managed to have a look on learners’ homework books and saw supervised homework with parents’ signatures. During observations, the researcher also observed that some few learners had their personal copies of sunrise readers which made acquisition of literacy skills difficult for those without personal copies when it comes to reading.

3. Alternative strategies that can be used by teachers to enhance ECD learners’ literacy development.

From the study it emerged that, the use of innovative methods such as jolly phonics, storytelling, drama, song and rhymes. It also emerged that reading competition, literacy programmes and mini libraries are alternative strategies to develop literacy among ECD learners.

The study revealed that, if teachers think outside the box and become more innovative in their teaching approaches literacy development can be enhanced. The use of jolly phonics, drama, rhymes and songs are more appealing to ECD learners. To support this finding, teacher in Charge 1 said, ECD teachers at our school use jolly phonics which are a comprehensive basis for writing and reading. Using jolly phonics bridges a gap between success and failure as it allows learners to acquire skills in phonetic awareness.

Teacher in Charge 2 added, ECD teachers use storytelling, drama, songs and rhymes in conducting literacy tasks among ECD learners.

To further support the finding, Teacher in Charge 3 asserted, ECD teachers should be engaged in literacy activities such as singing rhymes, storytelling and reciting poems. By so doing, learners will be demonstrating their expertise and also new words will be picked either from a story, a rhyme or poem thereby acquiring literacy skills.

During the study it was revealed that, teachers can enhance literacy development by engaging in literacy programmes such as reading competition, debates or drama. To validate this view, teacher in charge 1 said, ECD learners are also being involved in different reading and writing competitions as a way of assisting them to develop their literacy skills.

In support of the above submission, teacher in Charge 2 added, For successful ECD literacy programmes in schools, there is need to create mini libraries in ECD learners’ classrooms with a different reading resources such as picture books, story books, magazines, newspapers and many more as this will help ECD learners to develop a reading culture at a very tender age.

From the study, it emerged that, quality parental involvement through engaging parents in literacy activities enhances ECD learners’ language development. Parents can be engaged in consultative meetings with teachers and learners as well as becoming resource persons in some language activities. Parents can also be more involved in their children’s homework. To confirm this finding teacher in charge 1 said, parents can be involved in the ECD learners’ literacy development as they get more appraisal to understand their children’s language abilities through consultative meetings. Teacher in charge 2 added, literacy development can be achieved easily if parents and teachers work together. Parents must assist their children with homework, however, teachers should first capacitate these parents on ways to assist with homework. To further support parental involvement teacher in charge 3 asserted, parents should also provide their children with reading materials from an early age so as to enhance their literacy development.

Findings from observations indicated that ECD learners of the visited schools were engaged in diverse literacy tasks as evidence of different materials and costumes were seen in the dramatic play area. The alphabet with clear and bright pictures was observed by the researchers in all the visited classrooms.
Observations also indicated that learners were being engaged in storytelling as evidenced by circle time on the timetable.

**Discussion of Findings**

The study focused on factors influencing ECD learners’ literacy development from the Teachers’ perspective in Zvishavane District. Discussions on factors viewed by teachers as influencing ECD learners’ literacy development, challenges faced by ECD teachers during implementation of literacy tasks to learners and alternative strategies that can be used by teachers to enhance ECD learners’ literacy development in the classroom were addressed.

Findings from the study indicated that environmental factors do not only centre on schools but also the home environment of the learner (Fredrickson, 2016; Arnold, 2019; Chapman, 2020), since parents are the primary socialising agents to their children and set foundations for literacy skills competences in ECD learners. Sharing the same sentiment, Justice (2017) purports that literacy does not only occur in formal settings only and other institutional setups but start early enough in the home. Findings indicated that school environment as well as learners’ family background has an impact on learners’ literacy development. This finding is vindicated by the ecological systems theory which advances that the microsystem has elements such as the home, school, peers that influence the ECD learner’s literacy development (Salmon, Hesketh, Arundel, Downing & Biddle, 2020). According to Denton (2019), children’s literacy development is extensively influenced by partnership of parents and learners.

The study also revealed that availability of reading materials either at home or school with well-equipped libraries where learners can have time to read on their own has a positive influence on the development of literacy. This finding resonates with (Luchesse, 2018, Anorld, 2019; Chapman, 2020) who aver that cultural capital in form of reading resources promotes an interest in reading and come up with high literacy achievements.

1. Challenges faced by ECD teachers during the implementation of literacy tasks to ECD learners.

   From the research study it showed that high learner-textbook ratios in schools make it a challenge for ECD teachers in executing literacy tasks such as reading and writing to learners. This finding resonates with (Hedges & Gable, 2016; Ackerman & Banet, 2019; Bauer, 2020) who advance that lack of reading materials impact negatively on literacy development. This means that there is no individualised learning among ECD learners as they have to crowd over the scarce textbooks. This corroborates (Rowe, 2005; Hagans & Good, 2019; Loyd, 2020) who argue that lack of inventive teaching methods coupled with lack of reading materials impact negatively on ECD learners literacy development. This coincides with Hindman and Wasik (2018) who claim that low learner textbook ratios is one variables in ECD classrooms that influence learners’ development of literacy. Jenkins (2017) purports that individualised learning makes learning highly personalised and customised meaning that in one on one teaching, teachers can play the role of an accountability partner. Situations in schools do not proffer opportunities for individualised learning due to large number of learners in schools, as a result ECD learners tend not to develop their literacy skills.

   Another major challenge which emerged during the study was lack of parental involvement in the development of literacy skills among ECD learners. Lack of parental involvement can be due to poverty, negligence, lack of self-efficacy. The finding is vindicated by (Davison, 2017; Stanley, 2018; Carter, 2019; Holf, 2019), who suggest that lack of parental involvement is multi-pronged. Such lack of parental involvement compromises on the development of literacy skills among ECD learners.

   Lack of appropriate infrastructure in the literacy development among ECD learners was another challenge which was discussed by researchers in this study. Inappropriate of infrastructure was evident in
very small classrooms and bad wall in schools. This led to teachers failing to setup learning or play areas such as library corner. This finding resonates with (Ball, 2017; Cellano, 2017; Roskos & Newman, 2019; Saracho, 2020; Sutton, 2020) who advance that literacy development is hindered by poor infrastructure that limit creativity on both learners and teachers. Poor infrastructure also restricts easy trafficking which is necessary for embracing play pedagogies that are instrumental in literacy development.

2. Alternative strategies to enhance ECD learners' literacy development.

Deducing from the interviews and observations made it appeared that besides reading and writing, ECD teachers can use other alternative strategies to develop literacy in ECD learners. Strategies such as use of games, poetry, rhymes, storytelling and drama can be used during execution of literacy tasks to ECD learners Information accessed from Teachers in Charge indicated that ECD teachers use jolly phonics as a way of developing literacy in ECD learners. It also emerged from the respondents that ECD teachers at times deprive ECD learners the opportunity to engage in meaningful literacy activities because they limit themselves in exploring literacy concepts. This finding resonates with (Muguwe, Manzunzu & Mutonganavo, 2021) who advances that literacy is best developed using the play-way method. Since literacy evolves by the deviations in cultural forthcoming actions of cultures and developments in technology, so does the literacy definitions. The researcher however believes that literacy goes beyond reading and writing. As the situation is in most schools to succeed, ECD teachers engage learners in different activities such as drama, storytelling, rhymes and games so as to promote other forms of literacy.

4. CONCLUSION

In this study, factors influencing ECD learners’ literacy development in Zvishavane district have been examined and from the findings of this study, the researcher made the following conclusions. The research instituted that there are numerous outcomes focusing on the research question in which conclusions can be made. The researcher concludes that there is a great influence on environmental factors since they impel literacy development. This is because participants supported by observations made indicated that there are no libraries for independent reading and limited classroom blocks.

The study concludes that a conducive environment is all what is needed for ECD learners’ literacy development. The findings revealed that ECD learners of selected schools are not exposed to wide reading due to lack of libraries. It can be concluded in this study that inadequate resources and less parental environment in ECD literacy programmes influence negatively on the implementation of literacy tasks as literacy development requires more resources and support.

A further conclusion that emerged in this study is that inadequate resources have a negative influence on the implementation of literacy tasks to ECD learners. ECD teachers have a tendency of developing a negative attitude when resources are limited. Basing on this finding, the study recommends that government must avail funds to provide for resources such as textbooks and schools to engage in income generating projects and fundraising so as to purchase reading materials.

The study concludes that schools involved parents to a lesser extent in ECD learners’ literacy programmes since most of them believe that it is the responsibility of ECD teachers to assist learners to acquire literacy skills and not them.

The study concludes that ECD teachers are using other strategies such as games, poetry, rhymes, storytelling and drama to develop literacy in ECD learners. A further recommendation from the study is that workshops such as jolly phonics to be held at schools and constantly reviewed.

Findings from the interviews indicated that environmental factors do not centre on schools only but also home environment since parents of ECD learners are the centre connection. The study recommends that schools should engage in parental education on literacy development so that they can effectively
assist their children at home. As an area of further research, other researchers may study on suitable models to enhance literacy development in ECD children in different socio-cultural contexts.

5. REFERENCES


Bonci, A. (2016). *A research review: the importance of families and the home environment*, National Literacy Trust


