

# The efficacy of the school readiness initiative programme in the assessment of early childhood development learners in Buhera District

Nomatter Manzunzu, Nyaradzo Paula Mupome, Fortunate Mwaruta

Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

\*Corresponding Author: manzunzun@staff.msu.ac.zw

## ABSTRACT

*This study focused the efficacy of the School Readiness Initiative programme in the assessment of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners in Buhera District. A qualitative case study was used to establish the effectiveness of the School Readiness Initiative on the assessment of Early Childhood Development learners. Ten teachers from different schools were purposively sampled. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used to collect data from the participants. Data were presented in narratives and later analysed in themes. The results revealed that the School Readiness Initiative programme has positive effects in as far as Early Childhood Development learners' assessment is concerned. Some challenges in implementing the School Readiness Initiative programme in schools were poor internet connectivity, prolonged power cuts, and lack of expertise to use the Smart Tablet for Early Learning Assessment (STELA) tool on the part of the ECD teachers. The study therefore, recommended continual training of ECD teachers on various assessment techniques including the use of the STELA tool. It was also recommended that schools should have alternative sources of power such as solar energy.*

**Key Words:** Assessment, Early Childhood Development, Initiative, Readiness, Tool

## Article History:

Received 2024-08-19

Accepted 2024-10-18

## DOI:

10.56916/ejip.v3i4.941

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of Early Childhood Development programmes in Zimbabwe that is 2005, on the basis of secretary's circular no 14 of 2004, which was directing all primary schools to attach at least two ECD classes for children in the 3 to 5 years age group. It was a concern to all whether the programme is going to be taken seriously, accepted by parents or teachers. The government unveiled the training of Early Childhood Development personnel through colleges and Universities. As all these requirements started to unfold the question which remain unanswered is, "Are these ECD learners being assessed in their developmental milestones in a proper way?" In every learning process there is need for assessment so as to progress. Early Childhood assessment is a process of gathering information about a child, reviewing the information and then using the information to plan educational activities that are at the level the child can understand and is able to learn from. Assessment is a critical part of high quality, early childhood program. This study focused on the effectiveness of the School Readiness Initiative Programme in enhancing the assessment of the ECD learners in Buhera District.

In the World, national and local policies' view Early Childhood Development has been a centre of attraction over these past years. The Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 articulates the ECD target that "all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education." In order to acknowledge that there is quality education one

has to assess and evaluate. In the Western world according to McCollum (1973), to implement this programme the Child Development Associate (CDA) 's consortium was established in June 1972. The Consortium is responsible for devising procedures to assess performance of individuals in charge of three to five year old children in preschool programmes. This points out that they are tracking to ensure if the ECD learners were being assessed as per standards.

In Columbia, according to Kenji Kitamura, the SDG target 4.2 has two global indicators, aimed at capturing the "means" (early childhood education participation) and the "ends" (child development). To this study the 'means' is the curriculum and the 'ends' are the domains. As for the ends the indicator 4.2.1 is "proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track." Currently there is no globally accepted definition of "developmentally on track", and consequently there are no further definitions for the indicator so far" (UNESCO 2018.25). The indicator 4.2.2 of participation in early childhood education was incorporated as a means of achieving a goal of child development. However, access to ECD center alone does not ensure that children are developmentally on track. Based on research, two more indicators need to be taken into account as essential factors that underlie child development, home environment and quality of the ECD center.

As mentioned earlier, that Early Childhood Development has been increasingly gaining attention of many, the Childhood Education International provided resources that enhance childhood education programs throughout the world. The Global Guidelines Assessment (GGA) is an evidence-based instrument designed to help early childhood professionals systematically examine and improve the quality of their programme services particularly in low and middle-income countries. The GGA has been developed as a global tool and therefore can be used in Early Childhood Programmes around the world.

Based on research in Tanzania by Ndalichako (2007), teachers are heavily relying on traditional methods of assessment that include tests and quizzes. Teachers view assessment data as a means of improving teaching and learning although the aspect of using assessment to plan for the next lesson was lowly ranked. This reveals that in Africa the learners are still not yet being assessed in a proper way. According to Berry (2011), owing to each country's social, economic and educational circumstances, these countries planned and implemented their assessment reforms in their own distinctive ways but generally found tensions between the assessment practices. The researcher agrees with such a move because each and every country is unique therefore the difference in the assessment tools.

In Zimbabwe the assessment of ECD learners is affected by so many factors, lack of knowledge on assessment by teachers, huge teacher-pupil ratio, and shortage of resources, poor ECD centres, and even ignorance. Manzunzu and Manzunzu (2021) articulated that lack of resources for assessment hindered effective assessment. Outdoor play areas are in a sorry state, indoor learning areas have limited resources, furniture is either inadequate or inappropriate as stipulated by the statutory instrument 106 of 2005. Thus, these shortages hinder effective assessment since they also play a role in the effective assessment of the learner. Towards the improvement of the ECD centres, the Campaign for female Education (CAMFED) in partnership with the Roger Federer Foundation (RFF) came to Southern African countries and introduced the School Readiness Initiative Programme. The School Readiness Initiative was launched in seven countries which are Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The objectives of the School Readiness Initiative are; to secure a good start into primary education for vulnerable children due to access to quality ECD A and B. It will not only enhance children's readiness for school but also the school's readiness for children, focus on the improvement of the quality of learning at ECD level, looks at engaging relevant stakeholders, training of teachers on existing Child Development Monitoring Tools which will allow increased understanding of the development of children and help teachers to respond to their individual needs in the domains of language numeracy, physical, socio-

emotional and cognitive among others. In Zimbabwe the SRI is covering six Provinces which are Midlands, Masvingo, Manicaland, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, and Mashonaland West (School Readiness Initiative in Zimbabwe Handout, 2019)

This study focused on one district in Manicaland Province. The district had a huge number of schools under the School Readiness Initiative programme. However, there are conflicting views on the assessment of children at ECD. Some teachers advance that ECD learners must be given tests like those in infant classes, hence there is little appreciation for other forms of assessment such as authentic assessment.

## Research Questions

### *Main Research Question*

Is the School Readiness Initiative effective in the assessment of Early Childhood Development learners in schools?

### *Sub Research Questions*

1. How do teachers perceive the School Readiness Initiative?
2. Does the School Readiness Initiative improve assessment of learners at Early Childhood Development Level?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing the School Readiness Initiative?  
How do teachers seek to improve the School Readiness Initiative?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The understanding of the importance of early years that it carries lifelong implications on everything from learning to school success, family life and mental and physical health has been made easier by the philosophers and many theories. Assessment plays a crucial role in education as it provides information about students' learning progress and helps educators make informed decisions about teaching and learning strategies. Assessment as a process for documenting in measurable terms, the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs of the learner (Poehner, 2007; Yambi, 2018; Meldia & Melani 2022). This means that assessment is the process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about pupils' learning. The concept of assessment can be defined as the process of gathering and interpreting evidence of students' knowledge, skills, and abilities through various methods, such as tests, quizzes, projects, and observations (Dawson et al 2024; Winstone 2024). Assessment serves multiple purposes, including diagnosing students' strengths and weaknesses, informing instructional practices, and evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs. Therefore, assessment is an ongoing interactive process, in which the teacher and learner are involved.

The history of assessment in ECD in Zimbabwe can be traced back to the early days of the education system. During the colonial era, assessment in ECD was predominantly focused on academic achievements and cognitive abilities (Corbett & Redding 2017; Garira 2017). Children were evaluated based on their performance in standardized tests and examinations, with little consideration given to their social and emotional development (Smith 2015). This narrow approach to assessment often overlooked the individual needs and strengths of young learners, leading to ineffective outcomes.

In the post-independence era, there was a shift towards a more holistic and child-centered approach to assessment in ECD. The government recognized the importance of considering all aspects of a child's development, including physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains (Chikwiri 2017; Makokoro 2018). This led to the development of new assessment tasks, tools and techniques that aimed to capture the diverse needs and abilities of young children through different curricular approaches such

as the competency based and more recently the Heritage Based Curriculum (HBC) (Majani & Makokoro 2020; Matabvu 2024).

One of the key innovations in the history of assessment in ECD in Zimbabwe was the introduction of play-based assessments. Educators realized that traditional assessment methods were not suitable for young children, as they often felt stressed or intimidated by formal evaluations. Play-based assessments allowed children to demonstrate their skills and knowledge through hands-on activities and games, providing a more accurate reflection of their abilities (National Assessment Framework 2015-2022).

Another milestone in the history of assessment in ECD in Zimbabwe was the integration of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into assessment tools (Ndlovu 2018). Educators recognized the importance of valuing and respecting the diversity of children's backgrounds, and developed assessment materials that were culturally relevant and sensitive. This approach not only improved the accuracy of assessments but also contributed to the preservation of Zimbabwean cultural heritage.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on using technology in assessment practices in ECD in Zimbabwe. Digital tools and platforms such as the Smart Tablet for Early Learning Assessment (STELA) kit have been developed to facilitate data collection, analysis, and reporting, making assessment processes more efficient and effective (Maringehosi 2020; RFF Annual Report 2023). Educators have also explored innovative ways of using technology to personalize assessments and tailor them to meet the individual needs of each child. However, all the above stated assessment methods are more entrenched in authentic assessment.

Authentic assessment refers to the systematic recording of developmental observations overtime about the naturally occurring behaviors and functional competencies of young children in daily routines by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers in the child's life (Bagnato & Ho, 2006; Nguyen 2023). Authentic assessment is grounded in practice-based evidence in diverse and community-based early childhood programs and settings by parents and professionals working together to accomplish the major purposes for measurement within early childhood intervention (Bagnato, 2005; Mugweni 2017). This entails that authentic assessment in early childhood education aims to capture a comprehensive view of child's abilities, progress and development by observing, documenting and analysing their interactions, behaviors and achievements in natural settings and this can be enhanced by the use of digital technologies that can capture behavior in real time.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which views human development as a socially mediated process in which children acquire their cultural values, beliefs and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society (Mcleod, 2022). Therefore, the sociocultural theory emphasized on how assessment can be culturally influenced. Thus, how teachers and other education stakeholders can view the use of technological tools in assessment can have such cultural connotations.

The sociocultural theory emphasized that historical and social aspects of human behavior make human nature unique, particularly in the development of cognition. According to Thomas (2012) the theory acknowledges that social and cultural factors are important in the development of intelligence. This process of cultural socialization becomes a vital source of knowledge and cognition according to Santrock (2008). Matter which is taught to learners is found in their culture. Deep understanding of children's culture will lead to proper teaching and learning and also meaningful assessments.

According to the Socio-cultural theory, there is a close relationship between language and the development of thinking, so is the strong influence of language in assessment of ECD learners (Cherry 2022). Thus, the language used in assessment tools make them either drivers or inhibitors to effective

communication. This answers to two questions which are: 1. Is the assessment tool easy to understanding? And, 2. Does the assessment tool adequately address issues that needs to be assessed in learners? These questions can easily be addressed if the assessment tool is written in a simple and precise language. Thus, this vindicates Vygotsky's assertion that language is the vehicle of culture (McLeod 2020; Manzunzu 2022) and in it contains the history of social experience and is a tool for thought. Vygotsky views language as the vehicle of thought and assessment (McLeod, 2007; Muguwe, Manzunzu & Mutonganavo, 2022). It is therefore thoughtful to incorporate language when assessing ECD learners. In Zimbabwean ECD centers it is encouraged to use first language during teaching and learning process.

Vygotsky advances that social interaction influence language and thought (Manzunzu, 2022). According to McLeod (2007) higher mental functions are a result of social interaction. This means that full cognitive development requires social interaction. The major theme of Vygotsky's theory, as Santrock (2008) observes, is that social interaction plays a crucial role in the development of cognition. Social interaction, language and the concept of scaffolding have a bond. The sociocultural theory pinned the role of individuals which Vygotsky referred to as the more knowledgeable other in helping children comprehend their own culture in the society they live. This calls to the inclusion of parents as well as community in the teaching and learning process for fruitful assessment of ECD learners.

Zone of proximal development is an area where a child cannot solve a problem by self but needs guidance of an adult or a more knowledgeable other peer to lead him to success. (Woolfolk, 2004). Vygotsky described zone of proximal development as the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. It is an area where most instructions or guidance should be given allowing the children to develop skills they will attain for long life. Promoting social interaction among learners, parents and teachers will help in bridging the zone of proximal development. This can be availed through assessment.

Play is an important aspect in the teaching and learning process especially at Early Childhood Development level that need to be assessed using various tools for it provides real time anecdotes of behavior. Play has an impact on the cognitive and social development of children. Children learn as they play, there is an intertwined relationship between play and learning in children in a cultural context which enhances assessment (Meehan 2021; Yee et al., 2022). Play is a self-chosen activity by the child rather than prescribed by the teacher or parent (Irvin 2017; Pathways 2017). Therefore, play is any activity engaged by children for enjoyment, recreation and learning and it places observation as a key method of observation which gives primacy to the use of digital tools such as the STELA tool to capture development in all the domains (Sando 2021; Smith, 2023). The Early Childhood practitioner who is well versed can take this time to observe children at play and record milestones that are demonstrated or achieved, hence, assessment is done.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study the researchers adopted the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is typically associated with qualitative approaches. The main aim of this paradigm is to understand the world of human experience, which suggest that reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 2014). Interpretivism was adopted because the research tends to be done in greater detail and looks at culture and how people live their lives. The advantage obtained from using the interpretivist paradigm in this research is that the paradigm accommodates the use of case study-based investigations (Sharp et al., 2011) to illustrate processes, exceptions and barriers. The study was qualitative. Qualitative research relies on data obtained by the researcher from first-hand observation and interviews in the natural settings. This approach was chosen among others because it is flexible and focus on retaining rich meaning when interpreting data.

The study employed the case study design to collect and analyse data, to determine the relationship between the School Readiness Initiative Programme and the assessment of Early Childhood Development learners' domains. Descriptive survey design is the most common method which incorporates interviews, and observations (Locklear, 2012; Black, 2021). This study comprises ten purposively selected participants.

The researchers generated data using semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and observation. Semi-structured interviews maintain some structure but it also provides the researcher with the ability to probe the participant for additional details (Chekero 2018; Conner, Barry & Barry 2018). The researchers interviewed the teachers where participants were allowed to give their full view of issues and their thinking if the variables treated are loosely define. The researchers also observed the teachers implementing the School Readiness Initiative using the STELA tool in the assessment of Early Childhood Development learners in Buhera District. This method is versatile in a way that it is an indispensable primary source of data and a supplement to other method as it has directness to the natural data source.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### Result

In this section, data were presented in four themes which addressed the research questions and these are; Teachers' perceptions on the School Readiness Initiative, The School Readiness Initiative and the improvement of assessment of learners at Early Childhood Development level, Challenges encountered by teachers in implementing the School Readiness Initiative and Strategies to improve the School Readiness Initiative. The pseudonyms according to colours were used on participants so as to maintain their anonymity.

##### **Teachers' perceptions on the School Readiness Initiative**

The question was meant to find out teachers' perceptions on the School Readiness Initiative. The responses were obtained through interviews and questionnaires. Responses from the questionnaires proves that School Readiness Initiative is a programme which is the driver when it comes to Early Childhood Development assessment since it is providing teachers with assessment tools, finances for projects which will benefit in improving the indoor and outdoor play areas as well as learning resources.

Mr Blue wrote,

*Pre-learning assessment to post learning assessment is important to measure the impact of the learning process. 2. It assists to measure what learner has intellectually achieved, measure the expected against what the child knows. It helps the teacher on sourcing materials to be used after For example pre-testing hence important on budgeting.*

Mr Pink also wrote,

*Assessment is tracking the development of a child mentally, physically, emotionally and socially. 2. It is the driver because it improves the assessment process by providing with the assessment tools and resources at schools.*

Mr Purple also advanced,

*The SRI is the driver because it gave us grants to start projects in schools and the profits are used to develop the outdoor learning areas and buy the learning materials for learners.*

Mrs Brown corroborated, *It is fast, user friendly and data is kept safe and secure for a long time.*

Teachers manning the ECD A classes have shown dissatisfaction on the fact that Smart Tablet for Early Learning Assessment has been supplied to ECD B classes only. They have shown an attitude that



assessment is now centred on the STELA tool by not having hardcopies of each learner's Developmental Checklist.

From the observations made on two selected ECD B teachers, the researchers checked on their assessment tools and record books. It was noted that Mrs Blue made use of the tool box application in the STELA tool in improvising toys and puppets. Most activities which were executed by the learners emerged from the STELA tool. The record books were up to date hence the assessment exhibited.

### ***The School Readiness Initiative and the improvement of assessment of learners at Early Childhood Development level***

The researchers intended to find out if there is any improvement in the assessment of Early Childhood Development learners since the introduction of the School Readiness Initiative. Responses from both questionnaires it emerged that most respondents and interviews exhibited that the School Readiness Initiative is playing a pivotal role in the assessment of Early Childhood Development learners. Mr Blue said that the School Readiness Initiative programme helps the teacher on sourcing materials to be used after pretesting hence important on budgeting. Mrs Pink supported that by saying *the School Readiness Initiative improves assessment in such a way that it provides teachers with assessment tools and resources.*

Mrs Blue said, *The teacher will know the areas the learners have developed and those not yet developed.*

Mrs Brown added, *Yes. The teacher will be able to track and find areas of improvement*

Mrs Orange said *since the introduction of the School Readiness Initiative programme the attendance of learners has improved because the programme has revived the school feeding programme.*

Mrs Brown responded to the questionnaire pointing out;

*The School Readiness Initiative is helping schools to start up projects which will generate income and improve the indoor and outdoor play areas.*

Also the programme helped a lot in mobilising parents to construct ECD Blocks, indoor and outdoor play area using locally available materials. The availability of resources therefore made assessment easier.

### ***Challenges encountered by teachers in implementing the School Readiness Initiative***

The researchers intended to find out the challenges faced by teachers in implementing the School Readiness Initiative. Challenges such as poor network connectivity, power blackouts, and high teacher-pupil ratio and lack adequate resources such infrastructure emerged. To corroborate this, in the interview Mrs Blue saying,

*We are limited in terms of the school reaching to the parent who is the very person who give us the child, they have little time to attend to the child since they do not have real syllabi at home. Parents do not know what exactly to prepare for the child before bringing him or her to school.*

Mrs Green mentioned,

*Poor management of the project funds as a challenge in implementing the School Readiness Initiative by saying some of the funds obtained from the project are being channelled to other school businesses which is not beneficial to the ECD learner.*

Mrs Pink echoed,

*The School Readiness Initiative might become difficult to implement if teachers who are knowledgeable and the staff turnover is high as they are transferring from one school to another. When it comes to operating the STELA tool, it compounds the challenge of lack of expertise.*

Mrs Blue said, *poor network connectivity for syncing data to the serve was a major challenge.*

Mrs Brown added, *One cannot assess if the battery is off.*

Mrs Pink echoed, *The use of one STELA tool is not enough. It does not give room for adjustments. Thus it is prescriptive and limiting.*

Mr Pink waded,

*High teacher- pupil ratio militates against the assessment process. Capturing information about the learner using the STELA tool is taxing giving poor network connectivity in this area and incessant power cuts when using a STELA tool.*

To corroborate the assertion upon observation, Mrs Brown displayed facing challenges in assessing learners. She manned a bloated class of sixty learners. Her records were not up to date. In responding to an interview Mrs Brown reiterated that lack of resources, inadequate furniture and a huge number of learners is compromising the assessment process.

### **Strategies to improve the School Readiness Initiative**

The researcher's aim was to discern on how teachers are willing to improve the School Readiness Initiative. The data was elicited through interviews. Mr Blue said,

*Teachers have a great job to do in regards to improving the School Readiness Initiative for instance sensitising the parents on how important is the assessment of the ECD learner by sending homework and conducting awareness meetings.*

On the same note Mrs Pink advanced,

*Parents should be mobilised so that they work together with the teachers in constructing outdoor and indoor play areas, toy making, establish nutrition gardens and revive the feeding programmes to motivate learners hence alleviating the assessment process.*

Mrs Blue responded,

*For assessment to be effective, there is need for teacher training, resource mobilisation and income generating projects hence the School Readiness Initiative has the same goal.*

Mrs Pink said,

*The management and updating the assessment records is a challenge, hence, the need arises for peer to peer training at school level.*

### **Discussion of findings**

From the findings, the respondents generally agreed that the School Readiness Initiative was a driver to effective assessment in ECD. The initiative managed to enhance nutrition among learners which enabled the development of children across the domains and facilitated a comprehensive assessment of such children. The finding is in tandem with submission by (Poehner, 2007; Yambi, 2018; Meldia & Melani, 2022), who advocates that assessment is a process of gathering data to establish the development of children in all the domains, that is, cognitive, emotional, social, physical as well as health and well-being.

It is to a greater extent that the School Readiness Initiative is effective in the assessment of ECD learners since it is helping in mobilising parents, resources and making assessment of ECD learners contextually and culturally relevant. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory validates the finding which views human development and assessment as a socially mediated process in which children acquire their cultural values, beliefs and skills through collaborative efforts with more knowledgeable members of society (Yambi, 2018; Meehan 2021; Mcleod, 2022). Thus, the finding places parents at an important position in their children's assessment at ECD level. As children play, there is an intertwined relationship between play and learning in children in a cultural context which enhances assessment (Meehan 2021; Yee



et al., 2022). According to Lopez (2009) play should always be in a prepared environment as well as be child centred, promoting freedom for children to explore. Thus, the School Readiness Initiative enabled learners get hot nutritious meals at school, parents are involved in ensuring the development of their children.

Most importantly the School Readiness Initiative provided teachers with assessment tools equipped with activities suitable to the ages of the learners. The STELA tool is designed to assess various developmental milestones for children at different levels as Piaget argues that children's cognitive development occurs in stages (Papalia & Feldman, 2011). Activities in the STELA tool are arranged from simple to complex which means consideration on the age of learners were made prior to the design. This vindicates (Maringehosi, 2020; RFF Annual Report 2023)'s views that digital tools and platforms have been developed to facilitate data collection, analysis, and reporting, making assessment processes more efficient and effective. It also revealed that the STELA tool used simple language which made it user friendly and enhanced assessment. This finding buttressed Vygotsky views that language is a vehicle of thought and assessment (McLeod, 2007; Muguwe et al., 2022).

The challenges that were revealed during the study include among others high staff turn- over, high teacher pupil ratio and lack of expertise among teachers. The issue of high staff turn- over compounded the situation as it had a ripple effect of leading to lack of expert teachers. The teachers showed that they were not well versed in the ECD pedagogies let alone assessment needs and techniques. Some teachers were not trained in the use of the STELA tool and this compromised on the assessment of learners. This finding is at variance with (Bagnato, 2005; Mugweni 2017) who argue that authentic assessment is grounded in practice-based evidence in diverse and community-based early childhood programmes and settings by expert professionals working together to accomplish the major purposes for measurement within early childhood intervention.

In an effort to enhance the adoption and use of the SRI especially the use of the STELA tool continuous staff development workshops where the majority is taught about the assessment techniques and the use of the tool emerged as a key strategy. This finding was vindicated by Dawson et al 2024; Winstone 2024 who suggest that continuous peer training enhances the assessment ethics. Staff development can therefore take the form of in-service training programmes, staff development workshops at school or cluster level.

In addition, continuous collaboration with the community also emerged as a game changer in assessment of ECD children as the parents will play an active role by providing learning resources through construction of outdoor play areas, provision of hot meals, and more importantly provision of children's information needed for assessment. The finding dovetails with Woolfolk's (2004) view that promoting social interaction among learners, parents and teachers will help in bridging the gap in assessment. Thus, this can strengthen the School Readiness Initiative in the assessment of ECD learners.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Basing on the research findings, the study conclude that the School Readiness Initiative is promoting assessment of ECD Learners in the sense that it is helping teachers with assessment tools, providing financial support towards improving the ECD learning environment and also bringing the teacher and the parent together for the benefit of the child. However, lack of resources, poor infrastructure and high teacher- pupil ratio is compromising the assessment of ECD learners in Buhera District.

Most of ECD teachers are appreciating the use of Smart Tablet for Early Learning Assessment [STELA] tool which was given to them by the SRI programme sponsors highlighting that it is fast and secure in assessing learners.

### Recommendations

Following these research findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is need for the recruitment of more teachers in the ECD field to promote the smooth flow of the assessment process.
2. Teacher / pupil ratio to be 1:20 as stipulated by the statutory instrument 106/2005 must be enforced.
3. The school administration must work hand in hand with other stakeholders to improve and mobilise material resources and infrastructure of the ECD field to ease the assessment process.
4. The ECD teachers must make use of tool box which is found in the STELA tool to improvise on learning materials.

There must be constant and repeated workshops and retraining for ECD teachers and the school administration to keep them abreast with the technological assessment models such as the STELA tool kit.

### 5. REFERENCES

- Bagnato, S.J., & Ho, H.Y. (2006). High-stakes testing with pre-school children: Violation of professional standards for evidence-based practice in early childhood intervention. *KEDI International Journal of Educational Policy*, 3(1), 22-43.
- Bagnato, S. J. (2005). The authentic alternative for assessment in early intervention: An emerging evidence-based practice. *Journal of Early intervention*, 28, 17-22.
- Baker, E. L. & Linn, R. L. (2004). *Validity issues for accountability systems*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Capraro, R. M., Roe, M. F., Caskey, M. M., Strahan, D., Bishop, P., Weiss, C., & Swanson, K. W. (2012). Research Summary: Assessment. *Association for Middle Level Education*, 1-6.
- Chekero, T. (2018). *Suffering and surviving beyond home borders: Experiences of Zimbabwean women in accessing healthcare services in Giyani*, South Africa.
- Cherry, K. (2022) What is Sociocultural Theory? Very Well Mind. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-sociocultural-theory-2795088>
- Chikwiri, E, Musiyiwa, J. (2017). *Challenges and gaps in children's transition from early childhood development to grade one in Zimbabwe*. Women's University in Africa: Harare.
- Garira, E. (2017). *Needs assessment for the development of educational interventions to improve quality of education: A case of Zimbabwean primary schools*. Centre for Evaluation and Assessment: University of Pretoria.
- Irvin, M. (2017). *The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education*. Masters` Thesis, Northwestern College. Orange City.
- Makokoro, P., Majani, P. M (2020). Investment in early childhood development: Strong foundations for higher education in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. *Scientific Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences*. 9(1):909-914.
- Makokoro, P. (2018). Early Childhood Development: A case for increased investment. The News Day retrieved from <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/01/early-childhood-development-a-case-for-increased-investment>.
- Manzunzu, N. and Manzunzu, G. (2021). Early Childhood Development teachers` perceptions on assessment of learners: A case of Mutare district, Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Sciences*. Vol 5, Issue 1. Pp184- 191.

- Manzunzu, N. (2022). Early Childhood Development teachers' understandings of Indigenous Knowledge and their strategies for incorporating IK in their pedagogical practices. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 6(3), 79-98.
- McLeod, S. (2020). *Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development*. Simply Psychology.
- Matabvu, D. (2024). Unpacking the new heritage-based curriculum. The Sunday Mail <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw>.
- Meehan, M. R. (2021). Could that be Play?: Exploring Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Play in Kindergarten.
- Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts, and Culture (2004). *Secretary's Circular 4 of 2024*. Harare: Government Printers.
- Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts, and Culture (2005). *Statutory Instrument 106*. Harare: Government Printers.
- Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts, and Culture (2005). *Statutory Instrument 106*. Harare: Government Printers.
- Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. (2022). *National Assessment Framework for Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Government Printers.
- Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2020). *The Education Act*. Harare: Government Printers.
- Muguwe, E., Manzunzu, N. and Mutonganavo, A. (2022). Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Rhymes in Teaching English as a Second Language at Early Childhood Development Level in Gweru Rural District Primary Schools of Zimbabwe. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications Education*, Vol 6, Issue 2, pp79-87.
- Ndlovu, S. (2018). Cultural considerations in assessment practices in ECD in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of ECD*, 15(4), 267-280.
- Poehner, M. E (2007). Beyond the test: L2 Dynamic assessment and the transcendence of mediated learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91,323-340.
- Roger Federer Foundation, (2023). Annual Report. <https://rogerfedererfoundation.org>
- Sando, O.J, Kleppe, R. Sandseter, E. B. H. (2021). Risky play and children's well-being, involvement and physical activity. *Child Indicators Research*.
- Smith, J. (2015). The evolution of assessment in Early Childhood Development in Zimbabwe. *Journal of ECD Research*, 10(2), 123-136.
- Smith, P.K, George, J. M. (2023). Play fighting (rough-and-tumble play) in children: developmental and evolutionary perspectives. *International Journal of Play*, 2023; 12 (1):113-126
- Smith, P.K, Pellegrini, A. (2023). *Learning Through Play*: University of Minnesota. New York.
- Stiggins, R. & Chappuis, J. (2006). What a difference a word makes: Assessment for Learning rather than assessment of learning helps students succeed. *Journal of staff development*, 27(1), 10-14.
- Yambi, C.A.T (2018). *Assessment and evaluation in Education*
- Yee, L.J., Radzi, N. M. M., & Mamat, N. (2022). Learning through play in Early Childhood: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(4), 985-1031
- Zimbabwe National Constitution (2013). Government Printers: Harare.