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The readiness of schools in Zimbabwe for the implementation of early childhood education

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This qualitative study focuses on primary schools' state of readiness for the introduction of early childhood education. Adopting a multiple case study design, the article explores, through semi-structured interviews and documentation, school heads, teachers-in-charge and classroom teachers' perceptions of their respective schools' state of readiness for the installation and implementation of early childhood education. The study established that, while classroom teachers were adequately qualified to implement early childhood education, teachers-in-charge were not. Secondly, school heads received limited induction for the introduction and implementation of early childhood education. Additionally, inadequate teaching-learning resources and lack of on-going teacher support contributed to schools' lack of readiness for the introduction of early childhood education. The study recommends interventions that curriculum planners and implementers can utilise in order to create conditions that enable primary schools to be ready for introducing and implementing early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood education; implementation; primary school; school readiness

Introduction

Contemporary educational discourse has pushed early childhood education (ECE) and care closer to the forefront of what is considered progressive policy formation. International aid agencies, such as the World Bank, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) and others (Freeman & Faure, 2003), have promoted the creation and expansion of ECE programmes in developing countries. Developing countries, including Zimbabwe, have been caught in this storm of educational policy reform and have, consequently, demonstrated a new commitment to educational provision for pre-primary learners. According to Evans, Myers and Ilfeld (2000), the period of early childhood has been identified as the most formative in a child's development, one that will have long-lasting – even permanent – influence on his/her adult life. From birth to age eight, a child gradually masters increasingly complex levels of moving, thinking, feeling, and interacting with people and the world around him. Abundant evidence from diverse fields – physiology, nutrition, health, sociology, psychology, and education shows how these early years are crucial to the development of intelligence, personality, and social behaviour (Hubbard, Stein & Mehan, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

Evans et al. (2000) assert that roughly three stages of early childhood development lay the foundation for future growth. The most rapid period of brain development (cell growth and neural connections) takes place in the first two years of life. Although the structure of the brain is determined biologically, and, is considerably developed in the prenatal stage, a child's interaction with his/her environment will develop the critical brain connections that set the pathways for intellectual, physical, emotional, immunological and social functions (Freeman & Faure, 2003). The ability to walk as well as manual dexterity are developed in the first two years. From ages two through five, a child develops language skills, fundamental social skills, and the base for 'learning to learn' that translates into school readiness. Character and personality are largely formed, and major social and moral values are transmitted. From ages six through to eight, a child consolidates earlier learning, begins to learn conceptually, as well as to manipulate ideas, and enters the 'age of reason'. From the foregoing it can be observed that for Evans et al. (2000), Freeman and Faure (2003) and indeed for many scholars who have investigated learners between 0 and 8 years, ECE is very broad. In the Zimbabwean context, Grade Zero refers to pre-primary school learners and has specific age boundaries (3-5 years). Grade zero logically thus qualifies as a subset of ECE. It may thus seem odd to use Grade Zero and ECE interchangeably. For the purpose of this study, however, Zimbabwe policy circular 14 of 2004 uses grade zero and ECE interchangeably hence the use of this coupling in this study.

Evans et al. (2000) further highlight that if a child's body and brain develop well, his learning potential increases. Conversely, neglect of a child's biological and mental needs at this critical and formative stage can have a negative impact, resulting in delayed or debilitated cognitive development, stunted growth, and physical impairment. When a child's inherent physical, social, and psychological capacities are not nurtured, they wither. The quality of care during this period, through ECE, thus greatly affects the development of the child, his/her health, his/her psyche, and his/her capacity for future learning.

Provision of ECE in Zimbabwe can be traced to the early 1970s (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 1989). During that period, ECE was generally understood to include nursery schools, pre-school education, creche and ECE and care. The differences in nomenclature served to divide early childhood provision according to age of learners, with the first two categories referring to those learners (ages 5-6), who were preparing to join the formal primary school system, as distinguished from the latter two, referring to learners between 3-4 years of age. Zvobgo (2007) asserts that during this pre-independence era, ECE was largely provided in affluent urban areas. Rural areas had no such provision. The dawn of independence ushered in the high demand for ECE by the black working classes, and this led to a proliferation of pre-schools in urban centres, and some such centres were created in rural areas as well. Dyanda, Makoni, Mudukuti and Kuyayama (2005) have observed that the pre-schools which mushroomed at this time were privately owned, did not have a uniform curriculum, and were staffed by people with differing qualifications. It is such circumstances that the government of Zimbabwe was trying to address when it directed that Grade Zero/ECE be implemented in primary schools in 2006. To place this directive in proper context, a background to the introduction of ECE, both internationally as well as in Zimbabwe, is provided.

Background to the Study

Children and young people constitute more than half of Africa's population (UNICEF, 2003). Therefore, proper care of and investment in children, through sound ECE programmes, can ensure a bright future for the continent, with well-developed human capital and enhanced productivity. The most recent impetus for ECE and care growth in Africa can be traced to the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 20 November 1989, and its rapid ratification from 1990 onwards (Aidoo, 2006). In March 1990, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand, launched ECE and care as an essential part of the global movement to educate all children. The world declaration on EFA (UNESCO, 2004) observed that since learning begins at birth, it is imperative to give priority to ECE.

In September 1990, the World Summit for Children was held in New York to give the highest level of endorsement to the survival, development and protection rights of all children without discrimination of any kind. Jomtien's endorsement of ECE and the enthusiasm that led to the CRC being ratified more quickly and by more countries than any previous human rights instruments (UNICEF, 2001) gave rise to the proliferation of government ECE programmes. These programmes

were partly supported by multilateral, bilateral, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charitable organisations in Latin America, East Asia, Middle East and North Africa, but to a much lesser extent, in Sub-Saharan Africa (Jaramillo & Mingat, 2003). Aidoo (2006) further points out that in April 2000, a follow up conference on EFA, the World Education Forum, held in Dakar, provided an opportunity to review and assess ECE and care experiences to date. The conference made a renewed commitment to expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education. The call for comprehensive ECE and care received yet another high-level political endorsement (UNICEF, 2003) when the United Nations Millennium Summit of September 2000 adopted eight millennium development goals (MDGs) to be met by 2015. Six of the MDGs related to young children and women, and thus to ECE. According to UNICEF (2003) the six MDGs can best be met when the rights of children to health, education, and equality are protected. The six MDGs in question are:

- eradicating extreme poverty and hunger;
- achieving universal primary education;
- promoting gender equality and empowering women;
- eliminating gender disparities in schooling opportunities;
- reducing by two thirds the death rate of children under the age of five, and;
- reducing by three quarters, the ratio of maternal deaths to live births; and
- combating HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases (UNICEF, 2003:145).

According to Young (2002) the expanding vision of ECE and care since 1990 has further been promoted by a growing body of literature that advocates, justifies and reviews early childhood activities worldwide. This has helped clarify the concepts, scope and best features of ECE, as well as the rationale for governments and their development partners to invest in ECE and care programmes. The work of, among others, the Consultative Group of Early Childhood Care and Development and the Working Group on Early Childhood Development of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) has contributed significantly to the common view of the principles and main features of ECE and care policy provision (Vargas-Baron, 2004).

In Zimbabwe, ECE and care can be traced, as intimated earlier on, to the pre-independence era. During this colonial era, ECE services were provided in line with Statutory Instruments and Education Acts which portrayed bias, racial discrimination and segregation. For instance, whereas the Child Protection and Adoption regulations of 1972 provided for the establishment of custodial and healthcare centres for African children between ages of zero and three, the Nursery School regulations of 1973 specifically stipulated that provision of nursery education should benefit pu-

pils who are not Africans to prepare for formal learning. The table below clearly illustrates the

differences as spelt out in the two sets of regulations:

The Child Protection and Adoption Regulations of 1972	The Nursery School Regulations of 1973
Regulated the establishment of creches for children between 0 - 3 years.	Regulated establishment of nursery schools for white children between 0-6 years.
Administered by the Department of Social Welfare.	Administered by the Ministry of Education.
People with some health training e.g. nurses and midwives would man the creche.	Manned by qualified white nursery school teachers.
Focused on custodianship and healthcare of children.	Care taking and cleaning of the premises were done by citizens.
	Curriculum was structured to develop basic learning and developmental skills but not the 'three Rs' (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic).
	NB: Meant to prepare children for formal learning.

A number of observations can be made from the provisions of the two sets of regulations. Firstly, the creches to be established for African children, under the Child Protection and Adoption regulations of 1972, were to be brought under the auspices of the Department of Social Welfare. This means that the Ministry of Education was not in any way linked to these centres. Secondly, no curriculum was suggested under the Child Protection and Adoption regulations of 1972. On the other hand, the Nursery School regulations of 1973 (which were developed for white children), provided for nursery schools under the Ministry of Education. From these observations it is evident that while the 1972 regulations served a paediatric function, the 1973 regulations served a pedagogic function, which advantaged white children only. This meant that the ECE service, meant to provide a foundation for future development, was utilised only by the elite (non-Africans), thereby perpetuating the social and economic injustices at the earliest stage of child development.

After attaining independence in 1980, the new government's intervention with respect to these discrepancies only began in 1982, when the Child Protection and Adoption regulations of 1972 and the Nursery School regulations of 1973 were repealed (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 2006). New ECE and care programmes were initiated under the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs. The UNESCO (2006) country report on Zimbabwe states that the government realised that ECE and care programmes were necessary in order to promote the holistic development of children. These programmes would also enable early childhood learners to reach their full potential for formal schooling and life-long education. This realisation, by the Zimbabwe government led to the establishment and mushrooming of rural ECE centres with the majority of

them operating under trees and manned by untrained staff.

In 1988, the status of ECE and care was enhanced when it was brought under the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education (1989). This was a major turning point since ECE had all along operated under a ministry (Community Development and Women's Affairs) which had little to do with education. By placing ECE under the Ministry of Education the Zimbabwean government was acknowledging that ECE and care was an integral part of the formal education system. Early childhood education (ECE) was thus declared a basic human right, as for all other forms of education. Although the government, through the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture, took the lead in the development of ECE programmes, it should be highlighted that the Ministry of Education only provided a policy framework which guided the operations of ECE centres run by a variety of stakeholders outside the ministry. These stakeholders included, among others, local authorities and communities and their centre development committee structures, NGOs, church groups, as well as private organisations and individuals.

These various stakeholders effectively ran ECE programmes, which prepared children for primary education beginning at the age of six years (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 1987). Thus before this age, several programmes variously known as creches, nursery schools, day care centres, kindergartens and pre-schools, served children from three years of age. In theory, each name connotes a different target group and different content, differentiated primarily by age. The first four programmes are usually designated for children up to four years of age and are designed to provide mainly custodial care. On the other hand, pre-schools are usually meant for children between four and five years of age, and are more concerned

with school preparation (Dyanda et al., 2005). In practice, however, the name most establishments go by has more to do with marketing, with mixed age enrolment being the norm. UNESCO (2006) observed that from the late 1970s up to 2003, ECE in Zimbabwe, as represented by the above named categories, was largely run by local authorities, private individuals, non-governmental organisations, voluntary organisations and self-help groups. The Ministries of Women's Affairs and Community Development and Labour and Social Services, coordinated rural pre-schools. The Zimbabwe Ministry of Education (1989) only provided a policy framework for ECE operations with minimum guidelines for its supervision. Since education at this level was largely in the hands of private providers, financing of ECE has remained unclear. Home based pre-schools in urban areas have mushroomed, albeit at the expense of quality education. It has been documented that much of the curricula of private pre-schools are outdated, and inadequate for this age group, and the home environments are not conducive to learning (UNESCO, 2006). According to UNESCO, coordination and collaboration across all levels and ministries in the government is essential for a strong and cohesive ECE policy (Aidoo, 2006; UNICEF, 2008).

Given the above, there was an urgent need for a coherent policy on ECE. According to the Ministry of Education ECE was thus to be absorbed into the general education development policy framework and made part of a coherent, systematic, comprehensive and proactive development reality in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 2006). Realising that there was no coordination in the manner in which ECE programmes operated in particular, and in the manner in which education and training was operating in general, the Zimbabwean government set up a commission of inquiry into education and training to examine how the education system could be revamped. One of the terms of reference of this commission (Nziramasanga, 1999) was to identify areas in education and training that required reform on a short-term, medium-term and long-term basis. The commission identified ECE and care (term of reference 2.1.2) as a decisive area, where the foundation of the basic principles and philosophy of Zimbabwe's education system was to be laid. The commission thus recognised the importance of this stage in a child's life and education. It also took note of the fact that not all Zimbabwean children below the age of six years were able to access ECE (Nziramasanga, 1999). In the commission's view, an improved and extended system of provision of education for children in this age bracket would provide extensive long-term benefits for the nation. Such an educational change/reform was to be implemented by the Ministry of Education.

Educational change can be categorised either as a first order or second order change (Fullan, 2007). First order changes are those that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what is currently being implemented without disturbing the basic organisational features and without substantially altering the way children and adults perform their roles. Waks (2007) adds that first-order changes are initiated to enhance the existing organisation by correcting deficiencies in organisational policies and procedures. Such changes assume that the existing goals and structures are adequate and desirable. In our view, first order changes are thus not intended to alter the structure of an organisation/school. In theory, this arrangement should improve coordination, supervision and monitoring, as well as resource allocation. Second order changes, on the other hand, seek to alter the fundamental ways in which organisations are put together, including new goals, structures and roles. As an example of a second order change that has taken place, Waks (2007) points to a replacement of the common school by a graded elementary school in the mid-nineteenth century America. This change involved structural differentiation: the graded school had new parts put together in a new way. Children were grouped in age-graded classrooms, where previously they had been grouped in benches within a single one-room school, according to their discernible academic progress. From the foregoing, the second-order change, which Waks (2007) also calls 'fundamental change', means putting an existing organisation/school in a new working order through functional and structural alterations. It means change in educational ideas, norms, and organisational arrangements. Although Fullan (2007) asserts that most changes since the turn of the century have been first order changes, it is our contention that the introduction of grade zero/ECE was a second order change. The change was new to primary schools in Zimbabwe, and hence meant that new structures, goals and roles had to be developed. The foregoing has implications for the various school contexts in which ECE was introduced.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education instituted a policy that directed all primary schools to attach at least two Grade Zero/ECE classes for children in the 3-5 year age group to their schools. From the findings of Nziramasanga (1999), it was observed that the majority of Zimbabwean children, particularly those in rural and poor areas, did not have access to Grade Zero/ECE. Dyanda et al. (2005) assert that the commission recommended that all children go through Grade Zero, an ECE programme, before entry into the first formal school learning grade, in order to increase access and give every child a fair start. Grade Zero or ECE was mandated to be implemented in primary

schools with effect from 2006 (Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, 2006). This study seeks to investigate teachers' perceptions of primary schools' state of readiness for the introduction of this innovation.

Statement of the Problem

Prior to institutionalising policy 14 of 2004 ECE was implemented by local authorities, non-governmental organisations, church groups, private organisations and individuals. The curriculum used by the foregoing players was not uniform. It is against this background that primary schools which originally had no role to play in the implementation of ECE were directed to implement Grade Zero /ECE with effect from 2006. This study investigates primary school teachers' perceptions of schools' state of readiness for not only introducing but also implementing the early childhood innovation.

Research Questions

The study was structured around the following research questions:

- How were teachers prepared for implementing early childhood education?
- What resources were set aside for implementing early childhood education?
- How were teachers supported as they implemented early childhood education?

Methodology

This qualitative study makes use of a multiple case study research design. A case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a programme (like ECE), an institution, a person, a process or a social unit. By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity, (the case), this design aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study, which is also known as an examination of an instance in action or interpretation in context, is described by Bassey (1999:36) as an inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context." In this study, the phenomenon that is being investigated is teachers' perceptions of primary schools' state of readiness for the implementation of ECE. Early childhood education (ECE) was introduced in a particular context, namely primary schools. Five primary schools were purposively sampled and from each school the school head, the teacher-in-charge (TIC) and the ECE teacher were purposively selected as participants in the study. These participants were selected as they were considered to be information rich by working directly with ECE learners. It is thus imperative to investigate what the school heads, teachers-in-charge and classroom teachers (who are all referred to as teachers in this study) say about their schools' state of preparedness for this innovation. To investigate teachers' perceptions on primary schools'

state of readiness for implementing ECE, the study made use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

Findings

Data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis can be placed into the following themes which are now discussed below:

Teacher Preparation

From the interview data and school records, it was evident that teachers-in-charge only attended an average of two half-day workshops as preparation for supervising Grade Zero/ECE. Grade Zero/ECE teachers in four selected schools held diploma in ECE. These teachers were adequately prepared at teacher education institutions. From our personal interviews with school heads and teachers-in-charge, qualified Grade Zero/ECE teachers were described as displaying confidence and a capacity for warm relationships with learners. Such teachers were said to be nurturing towards ECE learners, skillful communicators, good role models and allowed children to learn through play. Unqualified ECE teachers did not, understandably, exhibit these characteristics. Such a picture points to the need for the Ministry of Education to ensure that persons engaged as ECE teachers are adequately and sufficiently trained. Only then, would it be possible to say confidently that Zimbabwe primary schools are ready for the introduction of Grade Zero/ECE with respect to availability of qualified teachers. At the rural school, however, unqualified teachers handled the two Grade Zero/ECE classes. Preparation for this group of teachers was done in workshops attended by teachers-in-charge. Interviews with unqualified teachers yielded no useful information, as these were not conversant with the procedures that teachers adopt in teaching-learning situations. Perhaps observing them teach a lesson or two could have shed more light on their state of readiness for implementing ECE.

Interview data and school records further revealed that school heads were provided with limited preparation for executing their roles with respect to ECE. In this respect, one school head had this to say: "although we attended three day workshops at the district office I cannot say that I am clear of what I am expected to do with regards supervision of ECE programmes. I need extended training perhaps for six months, or more." Consequently some school heads remained uncertain as to what constitutes ECE, as well as how ECE learners should be taught. This might perhaps explain why every time we raised specific issues on the teaching, supervision and assessment of learners at this level, school heads almost always referred us to either the TIC or the ECE teacher for clarification. One limitation experienced during this study relates to the use of two instruments to

generate its data. A use of observation might have been useful for triangulation purposes.

The introduction of ECE created challenges for school heads and TICs alike. The problem lay in the fact that they were confronted with having to cope with a new reality – managing the introduction and implementation of ECE – despite the fact that they were not specifically trained for it. From the demographical data, all school heads and TICs in this multiple case study had been trained to teach learners from Grade One, upwards. It is possible to argue that the ECE change was introduced by the Ministry of Education with insufficient consideration of how school heads and TICs as key players in curriculum implementation experience the process. Educational planners seemed to be unaware of the extent of the cultural shift they were requiring school heads and TICs to make. These teachers were expected to adjust personal habits, learn new skills, and perform new roles. Thus, the proposed change seemed revolutionary (in the sense that it was introduced using a circular/it came as a directive) rather than evolutionary for the majority of these school heads and TICs. Morrison's (2008:15) adage, "drag them by the hair and their hearts and minds will follow", seems to have been adopted with respect to involving school heads and TICs in the implementation of ECE. Early childhood education (ECE) could have, however, been better understood and assimilated into the primary school culture and structure had unqualified classroom teachers, teachers-in-charge, and school heads been adequately prepared for the innovation.

Availability of Resources

With respect to availability of appropriate resources, most participants indicated that schools had very little to use in the implementation of Grade Zero/ECE teaching. Additionally, all participants were of the view that school diversity was ignored by policy makers and planners when ECE was mandated. In particular, the promulgation of the Grade Zero/ECE policy did not take into consideration the differences between schools which were previously disadvantaged; schools that are in rural and high density areas with their associated poverty and need; and those in suburbs, with associated affluence. As Rogan and Grayson (2003) point out, not all schools have the capacity to implement a given innovation to the same extent. Resources are certainly one major factor that influences school capacity. In this study, we argue that planning for resources as well as actual provision could have enhanced primary schools' chances of being ready for the introduction of ECE.

Teacher Support

Support provided or lack thereof is one of the most commonly cited reasons why educational inno-

vations fail to be implemented. Huberman and Miles (1984:273), highlighting the importance of support, observed that "...large scale change bearing innovations lived or died by the amount and quality of assistance that their users received once the change was under way." One of the findings of this study is that there was no on-going support for school heads, teachers-in-charge and ECE teachers in most of the schools which constituted this multiple case study. This lack of on-going support thus seems to have contributed to some of these schools not being quite ready for the introduction of this innovation. Literature makes it clear though that support needs to be used in combination with pressure. In connection with this, Fullan (2007) argues that if centrally regulated reforms are to succeed, pressure and support are both necessary. As Dalin (1998:252) has pointed out, "pressure without support will get us nowhere. The more extensive the changes, the more support required." Early childhood education (ECE), as a system-wide innovation required both support and pressure for it to take root and be implemented in primary schools. Providing on-going support to the key participants is an acknowledgement that ECE implementation is a process, not an event, and that its implementation does not proceed on autopilot. One lesson evident from this study is that policy makers should take into account that curriculum implementation is not linear, as espoused by the fidelity perspective, but is messy and complicated. Educational programmes, like ECE, are implemented in specific contexts which may require that certain conditions be met before actual implementation takes place. These conditions, which may not have been anticipated by policy planners, highlight the need for implementers like school heads, TICs and ECE teachers, to be provided with as much support as possible.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Educational innovations often focus on changing the visible structures within schools (restructuring) and tend to ignore prior knowledge, attitudes, experiences, beliefs, norms and values (re-culturing) of school heads and TICs within schools. Although it may take a long time, the preceding can be changed through instituting pre-implementation programmes. It does not appear that a consistent re-culturing arrangement was put in place by the Ministry of Education. One lesson that could be learnt from this case study is that key participants in innovation implementation, like school heads, TICs and ECE teachers, should receive re-orientation and retraining well before innovations are introduced.
- In many cases, policy planners seem to believe that policy is normative and practice should follow suit. Given the complexity and the unpredictability of innovation implementation, an initial piloting followed by a progressive implementation of ECE

could have helped policy planners to identify some of the challenges primary schools experienced as they struggled not only to install, but also to implement ECE. Indeed, a phased approach could have taken into account the diversity of the schools which were to implement ECE. In matters of policy implementation, primary school heads' roles need to be granted considerable attention. The clearer their roles in the implementation process, the better, since ambiguity is often experienced as a threat. Consequently, as key gatekeepers in the education system, school heads should be amongst the first practitioners to be re-oriented, re-trained and well-informed about the introduction and implementation of new innovations, such as Grade Zero/ECE in primary schools.

- Teachers-in-charge should attend intensive staff development sessions on ECE during school holidays. These staff development sessions should be developmental particularly during the first critical years of ECE implementation in order to provide them with the support necessary to update their pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge on the teaching of ECE. Adopting such an approach enables TICs to maintain the same vision of the ECE innovation. Additionally, this enhances their competence and confidence levels in supervising the day to day activities of ECE teachers and learners.
- Curriculum policy change and implementation is increasingly shaped by broad forces of consultation of stakeholders on the nature and direction of the change that is perceived to be desirable. Such dialogue fosters more commitment from school heads, teachers-in-charge (TICs) and ECE teachers, and gives them a sense of ownership. It is thus recommended that curriculum policy planners engage these practitioners as a way of ensuring that the phenomenology of change – that is, the way in which people actually experience change – is accounted for in the process of implementation.
- Programme implementation depends on adequate support. Effective teacher support mechanisms should thus be put in place by both the Ministry of Education and School development associations (SDAs) to ensure effective installation, implementation and institutionalisation of ECE in Zimbabwean primary schools.

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