

The influence of perception on the provision of early childhood education in the Kumasi Metropolis of Ghana

Samuel Oppong Frimpong

Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

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ABSTRACT

An individual is born with millions of neurons and the quality of the experiences he/she will have at the early years can potentially determine the future life of that person. This makes quality early childhood education pivotal. However, the perception people have about this influence how they prepare themselves to provide that quality early childhood education for young children. Thus, this qualitative research purposively sampled 26 participants to elicit their views about the perception they have about the criticality of early years experiences and how the perception influenced how they were providing the early childhood education within the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana. Data in the form of interview were analysed thematically. The study found that experiences through the early childhood education are criticality serving as the foundation for future education. The study also found that developmentally appropriate infrastructure (such as tables and chairs sized to the height of learners, spacious and well-ventilated classroom), teachers who are specifically trained in early childhood education and child friendly pedagogy should be in place to ensure quality early childhood education and that how early childhood education was perceived greatly influenced how it was provided. The recommendations based on the findings are that, there should be more advocacy by teachers and headteachers on the criticality of early years experiences to ensure people's sufficient appreciation for quality early childhood education for young children. Importantly, early childhood education should be completely detached from the primary and basic school to enable it receive the due attention and the needed provision. Individuals with the right perception should be engaged with the provision of ECE.

Keywords: Perception, quality, provision, early childhood education, experiences.

E-mail: sofrimpong@uew.edu.gh.

INTRODUCTION

Experiences at the early life of an individual are extremely important. Thus, the exposure an individual will have and the opportunity he/she will have to manipulate and interact with his/her environment goes a long way in determining the individual's future development (Mustard, 2007; Papadakis et al., 2016; 2018; Ekinci-Vural and Doğan-Altun, 2021). An individual is born with millions of neurons that can potentially determine the future life of that person (Woodhead, 2006). However, the opportunities the individual will have to enable the neurons to be stretched and activated is what will bring about the successful development and this is what early

childhood education does (Pugh, 1992; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Young, 2007; Papadakis et al., 2016). How the early childhood education will be provided is, known through research to be, influenced by the perception of teachers, headteachers, parents, etc. who provide it. This study therefore is intended to investigate the perception these stakeholders have about early childhood education provision and how the perception influence the way they provide the Early Childhood Education (ECE). The remaining sections cover review of related literature, methodology employed for the study, presentation and discussion of findings, conclusions drawn from the

findings and recommendations informed by the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Related literature was reviewed along what ECE is, criticality/relevance of ECE, stakeholders' perception of what is ECE and how perception influences how ECE is provided. ECE encompasses developmentally appropriate programmes that serve children from birth through age eight. It often focuses on children's learning through play (Essa, 2003). It is defined as the educational provision aimed at meeting the academic, health, nutritional and psycho-social needs of children between 0 and 6 years old in an interactive environment conducive for their optimal development (Oppong Frimpong, 2017).

Criticality and relevance of QECE

ECE plays a critical role in a child's social and emotional development (Pugh, 1992). Research has shown that the quality of experience through ECE children receive in their early years is a key determinant in the formation of their intelligence, personality, abilities for life-long learning and social behaviours, among other characteristics (Pugh, 1992; Evans et al., 2000; Woodhead, 2006; La Paro et al., 2012). Additionally, good quality ECE (QECE) programmes help children to develop better mathematical competence, approved social skills, language and literacy skills and better interpersonal relationships (Sylva et al., 2011, La Paro et al., 2012; Papadakis et al., 2016; Ekinçi-Vural and Doğan-Altun, 2021).

Discoveries in brain science and child psychology have indicated how crucial experiences at the early years are and the important role ECE plays in children's development and their ability to succeed in school and in later life (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Mustard, 2007; Young, 2007). Children who are exposed to richer early year's experiences through ECE are provided with a solid base for lifelong learning; it helps them to develop knowledge, skills, self-confidence and a sense of social behaviour (Mustard, 2007). Available research shows that ECE is able to provide support to meet the academic, social, health and nutritional needs of children before starting formal school (Rolnick, 2004; La Paro et al., 2012; Fourie, 2013; Ministry of National Education (MoNE), 2020). ECE is considered important because it marks the beginning of a child's formal educational experience; a stage during which a child's potential can be nurtured (Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MWCA), 2004).

Early childhood education also sets the stage for the child's later success in life (Evans et al., 2000; UNICEF, 2020). Other benefits derived from ECE include developing writing and literacy skills (Sylva et al., 2011, 2004; Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2012). Schweinhart et al.

(2005) note that children who participate in ECE do better in their later schooling than those who do not. Much of the brain's development (which is known to be controlling the human behaviour is set by the time the individual is at age five and childhood is the time certain experiences (e.g. education and affection) are needed for the brain's development (Woodhead, 2006). Much as the brain continues to grow and develop after childhood, it has been found that the rate at which the brain develops is fastest at childhood than any other stage of an individual's life (Fischer, 2012; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

ECE achieving these benefits notwithstanding, much more to it is the quality of the provision. Quality ECE has been shown to make children happy and punctual at school (UNESCO, 2005), make them more ready for primary education and increase their enrolment (Schweinhart et al., 2005), help them to develop healthily (Clement, 2004) and make them feel secured with their teachers in the school (White, 2013). The evidence clearly shows that the experiences of children in their early years have a significant impact on their general development and that QECE provision is paramount in achieving this development. Given the premises, it would be important to educate children well at that early stage so as to ensure their optimum development. Like other developing countries in the world, Ghana has made several strides, including enacting legislation and formulating policies, at providing and establishing the best possible formal education for individual between 0 and age 8, both at the colonial and post-colonial eras (Sackey, 2009).

Influence of perception of ECE provision

In spite of the efforts made, available literature indicates that the perception ECE stakeholders (i.e. teachers, head teachers, education officers, and parents) have about ECE influences the attention they would give to its provision (Lemaire et al., 2013; Phoon et al., 2012; Robbins, 2008). Perception is explained as a process by which an individual organizes and interprets sensory impressions in order to give meaning to the environment (Robbins, 2008). Much as perception, to a large extent, influences one's decision and behaviour, it is equally important to acknowledge that perception can be substantially different from the objective reality (Robbins, 2008). This suggests that, though two individuals can be confronted with a similar phenomenon, the interpretations and subsequent decisions made about the phenomenon can differ greatly from one to another. What this implies is that in providing ECE, the perception of the stakeholders involved in the provision is very much critical as it can influence how they will provide the ECE.

Robbins (2008) and Lemaire et al. (2013) argue that how ECE is provided may be a direct reflection of the perception and aspirations of stakeholders. The

implication is that stakeholders provide ECE based on their understanding of ECE, and for that matter, what QECE is. This includes the environment to be created, how learners should be involved in the process and how they would generally play their roles in the implementation of the ECE programmes. The researcher's informal conversations with some ECE teachers and head teachers, during his Master of Philosophy practicum and as an early childhood educator, revealed differing understandings of what constitutes QECE provision. For example, while some of the teachers and headteachers thought that any premises could be used for ECE provision so long as the teachers are trained, others argued that the premises equally matter, if one is aiming at quality. This suggests that there could be varied views about the concept of 'quality' ECE and the conditions under which this could be obtained.

Lemaire et al. (2013) also found, in their study in the Western region of Ghana, that when stakeholders perceived that ECE teaching could be done by anyone, irrespective of academic or professional training in ECE, they posted untrained teachers to the schools to teach at the ECE classes. Moreover, better classroom blocks were assigned to the primary and Junior High Schools (JHS) at the expense of the ECE because of the stakeholders' perception. Several interesting questions thus emerge for consideration owing to the foregoing discussions. These include: Stakeholders' perception about the quality of ECE in the selected schools; challenges facing the teachers in providing the ECE; Conditions in which teachers are providing the ECE; and implications of the provision of ECE in the selected schools in relation to quality.

Problem statement and purpose of the study

The problem was that, as there was a research proving how stakeholders' perception influenced the way they provided the ECE in the Western Region of Ghana, such evidence, through research, was not available in the selected schools in the Kumasi Metropolis of Ghana. There was therefore the need for such empirical evidence regarding the perception stakeholders in the selected schools had and how it influenced their ECE provision. This study contributes to knowledge by establishing the perception ECE stakeholders, in the selected schools, have about the criticality of early years and ECE provision; their perception about what QECE is; and how their perception influences how they provide the ECE. The outcome is anticipated to inform policy about advocacy on stakeholders having the right perception towards the provision of ECE in Ghana and beyond. Two research questions were formulated to guide the study. They were:

1. What is stakeholders' perception about the criticality of

early years and QECE provision?

2. How does the perception of stakeholders influence the provision of ECE in the selected schools in the Kumasi Metropolis?

METHODOLOGY

Interpretive paradigm which underpins qualitative research and which contends that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005: 12) and context-bound (Silverman, 2001) was employed in this study. Interpretivist research is shaped from the standpoint of the individual to the generation of broad patterns and eventually to a theory (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The Interpretivist approach adopted for the study was intended to help give an in-depth interpretation of people's perception of ECE provision in Ghana (Bryman, 2008).

Population, sampling techniques and instrumentation

The study was done with 13 ECE schools from 13 circuits in the Kumasi Metropolis. Using purposive and simple random sampling techniques and based on the interpretive paradigm, interview was used to collect data from the participants. The instrument was semi-structured interview guide intended to sample views from these participants who were deemed to be information rich (Bryman, 2008). Items on the interview guide were informed by the two research questions formulated to guide the study. Nine and 11 items were developed to elicit views from participants to answer research questions one and two respectively. All the items were open ended, to allow participants to freely express their views and for the researcher to probe for clarification and or more information whenever it was needed.

The 26 participants who took part in the study were selected from 13 schools within 13 circuits. A school was selected from each of the 13 circuits. In each of the selected schools, a kindergarten or nursery teacher was selected. In addition, five headteachers, five parents and two circuit supervisors were randomly selected from the 13 selected circuits and schools. The Metro ECE Co-ordinator was also selected. To select the parents, the attendance register of the class of the ECE teacher selected to take part in the study was collected by the researcher and a learner was randomly selected from the register. After this, the parent of the learner who was randomly chosen was subsequently contacted to be part of the study. Where a parent was not ready to partake in the study, the selection of the parent was nullified and another was made using the same process.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Attention was given to the distances between the schools

within the study's site because the researcher wanted to have participants fairly spread within the areas selected for the study. The researcher took cognizance of the busy schedules of the participants involved in the study and therefore ensured that the interview data collection did not interfere with their regular activities.

Every interview session was started with an explanation about the purpose of the study. This was followed by a brief description of ethical considerations (i.e. confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent) and the fact that each interview session was going to be recorded using audio. At the end of every interview session, the audio-recorded interview was played to the participant and the transcribed interview were also sent to them to ensure their satisfaction and agreement with the content. Where a participant was not too comfortable with portions of the content, those portions were edited to the satisfaction of the participant. Participants were also given the opportunity to express themselves either in English or in the local dialect (TWI). There was no need for an interpreter since the researcher comprehensively understood the local dialect. With this privilege, two of the interviews were conducted in the local dialect.

With respect to data analysis, the researcher first translated the recorded interviews which were conducted in TWI after which all the interviews were transcribed. Content analysis, which breaks up text to unearth salient themes within it (Braun and Clarke, 2006), was used for the data analysis. With this procedure, the transcribed texts were read over and again to identify patterns of similarity in relation to predetermined themes. The identified patterns were then grouped to form sub-themes and subsequently main themes in conformity to the predetermined themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process of qualitative data analysis was intended to seek meaning out of the text generated from the transcriptions of the recorded interviews. In all, 26 interviews were transcribed. How the collected data was analysed is presented in the next section.

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA

The analysis has been done in accordance with the two research questions which guided the study. In order to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, pseudonyms have been used for each of them. The designation of the participants (i. e. CS – Circuit Supervisor; P – Parent; C – Coordinator; T – Teacher and HT - Headteacher) have also been attached to the names.

RQ 1: Participants' perception about the criticality of early years and QECE provision

Criticality of early years and relevance of QECE

The reviewed literature has revealed the criticality of early

years. Participants in this study also generally perceived that early years are so critical. For example, **Ms Serwaa (P)** was of the opinion that:

Quality ECE is very important for children because that is the foundation and without a good foundation, I don't think you will get any good building.

Mrs Manu (C) added:

Kindergarten education is a very good thing because to me, it is the basis that is the foundation and so if we do it and do it well, I mean if we provide quality KG education, we wouldn't have problems at the other levels.

There was however a deferring view regarding the criticality of early years. A participant had this to say:

*The early years are important but it is not so important that you cannot do without. At the early stages like the kindergarten, the children just go to school without doing any serious learning. So even if they don't teach them, they will pick up when they go to upper class and the JHS. So they can always learn what they couldn't learn at the early years. If they miss the upper class like the JHS, that is where the problem is (**Mr Abdallah [T]**).*

In a similar view, Madam Grace (CS) pointed out thus:

The early childhood period is important but I think we should be a little careful the way we talk about it as if without it the world will come to an end. If we are not careful, we will concentrate only on that and leave the other levels but I think levels are important.

In a seemingly departure from these views, the view of **Ms Oteng (HT)** was:

Children are able to learn fast and whatever we expose them to, that is what they will learn so if you lay a wrong foundation as a result of what you teach them, it will be very difficult or even impossible to reverse it so quality ECE is important factor to be emphasized at that early stage.

Ms Sandra (T) pointed out that:

Research shows that about 75% of what the child will be in future is acquired by the age of four or so. So at that age, if you are able to train or let me say teach the child on the skills and all the good things you want him/her to learn, it will

help in the long run to raise up the child in the way you want.

To further support participants claim that what children are exposed to is what they learn, **Mrs Adutwum [HT]** commented thus:

The children used to eat in class and I told the teachers that it is not the best. The thing is that, if we are not able to concretize the vision and the future of the children through quality ECE, they will get a false start and it is not everybody who can correct it as the person grows up.

Participants' perception through their responses suggest that QECE serves as the foundation for one's knowledge acquisition and that, without a solid foundation through the provision of QECE, there is not likely to be a good building, which can be a good future of the individual. What this implies arguably, is that if a solid foundation is laid for knowledge acquisition at the early years, other levels of education and the later life of the individual could build on it. This further implies that the other levels of the educational ladder will have a smooth progression due to the solid foundation laid. The responses appear to sign a word of caution not to present the early childhood level as the only level attention needs to be given to at the neglect of the other levels. The responses seem to suggest that, the individual can make amends and compensate for what was lost at the early childhood level as he/she progresses through the other levels. This caution notwithstanding however, it should be acknowledged that if a very solid foundation is laid, even where there will be deterioration, it can be better managed than where a poor foundation is laid.

What constituted QECE

The quality of the ECE teacher

Through the analysis of participants' interview responses about what QECE is, the training of teachers, the pedagogical strategies the teachers use and the availability and accessibility of TLMs and play equipment emerged as factors that constitute QECE. Views of participants on what constitutes QECE have been presented below.

You cannot have QECE without the proper place where the children will learn. The place should be beautiful and attractive to the children. They need things that they will learn with. (Mr Awuni [P])

I don't think QECE can be provided in a classroom where the children are too many. For quality early childhood education provision, the

teachers who are should be trained for the early childhood teaching, and you need good infrastructure (Ms Lucy [T])

Teachers at the ECE level should be trained. It should not just be the old notion of someone who loves children should just occupy them. They should have proper training in ECE so that they can give our children the best. Ms Nancy (T)

As for the ECE what is important is that the children have somewhere that is so beautifully arranged and well decorated. For the one who will take care of them, it doesn't matter, especially if the teachers are females because after all the children don't learn anything. It is only play, sing and sleep. Ms Juliana (P)

With these views expressed, one could not agree better with **Mrs Manu (C)** when she said "quality education largely depends on the quality of the teachers'. The responses suggest that, if teachers don't have the required training, their relationship with their children, the pedagogy they adopt and how to combine available facilities will not help the learners in the end to achieve their learning (Harms et al., 1998; Mooney et al., 2003).

Pedagogical strategies and the use of TLMs

The professional and specific training a teacher has acquired in ECE affects the teacher's ability and skills to adopt developmentally appropriate pedagogy which will enhance the children's learning at the ECE centre (Early et al., 2007). On this, participants' views were that:

We expect the pedagogy at the pre-school too to be child centred and we want the teachers to use a lot of play activities ... where the teacher uses lecture methods, it will negatively affect the child's understanding and performance. (Ms Sandra [T])

Teaching at the ECE level should take the ages of the children into consideration. Since the children too young, even the choice of words the teacher should use should be simple to the level and understanding of the learners. (Sir Louis [CS])

Not only are teachers expected to use simple words and allow children to be active, they are also expected to group them during instruction. For instance, **Ms Oteng (HT)** said:

I am expecting the teachers to be able to group the children by their abilities and then get extra time for those who have not gotten to where we

want them to be. I expect this to be a regular practice.

A corollary from the participants' responses suggests that if the teacher adopts a pedagogy which is not activity and child-led, the teacher will not involve the children much. Participants also identified availability and accessibility of TLMS and play items, including the general infrastructure as contributing to QECE provision. Participants' views were that:

Children's learning is by what they see so the schools should have different kinds of materials. Those visual, audios and those that are both, in the school so that the children can see, manipulate and play with them to facilitate their learning. (Mr Mba [HT])

The perception of **Mr Asiedu** about using TLMs was that:

If the teacher uses real objects at that level, the children will see, they will touch and they will understand.

The impression from the responses is that if TLMs and play items are available and the children have access to their use, then learning can be enhanced and teaching becomes more real and practical to the learners which promote their understanding and retention. In sum, this research question has been able to elicit responses regarding why early years experiences are critical and what constitutes QECE. The responses seem to point to the fact that early childhood experiences and for that matter QECE lays a solid foundation on which the other levels of education build. It has been established through the responses that factors such as specific training of teachers in ECE influence and enabled them to select the appropriate TLMs and pedagogy to facilitate learning. The next section presents responses on how participants' perception influenced their ECE provision.

RQ 2: How the Perception Influenced the ECE Provision

Participants expressed their views about how perception influences ECE provision. Four themes emerged from their responses. The themes were parental responsibility towards their children; the behaviour of some of the headteachers by way of supplying materials and posting teachers to ECE centres; how some of the ECE teachers behave towards their children and how infrastructure and other facilities are provided to the ECE Centres.

Parental responsibilities towards their children

On this issue, participants' responses on the

responsibility of some parents were that:

Some parents see preschool to be where their children only come and play so they don't provide for their children when they are coming to school (Mr Asiedu [T]).

Other parents feel that ooh we are just coming to waste time. I need more time to go and make money so going to the work or market is more important than sending my child to school or attending PTA meeting (Ms Sandra [T]).

The challenge is that some of the parents simply want to concentrate on the education of those at the JHS and this is seen where you have two children of the same parent one at the JHS and one at the KG. Of course, not all the parents are like that. Others give equal attention to their children whether at the JHS or ECE level. (Mr Mba [HT])

Possibly admittedly, a parent (**Mr Bawa**) confessed that:

For me I want to have time so I can go to work that is why I sent my child though he is too young. As for the early childhood centres sometimes when they go there, they sing songs and recite rhymes, they eat after which the teachers will let them sleep until it is closing so I don't worry myself buying books and other things.

The behaviour of some of the headteachers

Regarding how some headteachers were behaving in terms of posting teachers to the ECE centres and supplying materials, **Mrs Manu (Co)** said:

Some of the headteachers think the children basically play at the KG. As such, it is a place for teachers to rest and for teachers who feel they are sick so they cannot do well in the primary or JHS. Therefore, they are those they send there.

A parent (**Ms Serwaa [P]**) had this say:

I asked about the teacher of my child and I was told that the headteacher has transferred her to class six because the head said she was good.

The response of **Mr Effa (HT)** appears to corroborate that of **Ms Serwaa (P)**.

Truly, some of the teachers don't pull their weight when they are at the basic school so such

people, I transfer them to the early childhood section. At the same time when I find that somebody is very good at the early childhood centre, I can transfer the person to say the upper primary.

Attitude of some ECE teachers towards their children

Some responses also centred on the attitude of some of the ECE teachers. On that, **Sir Louis (CS)** had this to say:

Some of the KG teachers also think that they are only keeping the children and they will be taught at the next levels. Because of this, sometimes when you visit the school, you will find some of them just conversing and they will leave the children alone.

The views of these teachers were:

With my training, I know that the children look up to me so I pay attention to them and give them all the audience. (Ms Barbara [T])

At this foundational level, whatever you do to the children lives on with them so as for me I try to give everybody equal attention and help them to come out with whatever is in them. (Mr Yongo [T])

Pedagogically, the views of these teachers were:

I do most of the talking because the children are too young to be explaining issues. (Mr Blay [T])

Ms Nancy (T) on the other hand said:

At least these children know something before coming to school so I try to use that one and still involve them and we learn together.

How infrastructure and other facilities were provided

In terms of how perception was influencing the provision of infrastructure to the ECE centres, **Mrs Nimako (T)** lamented that:

Although ECE is part of Ghana's educational system, it is still suffering. To me, the government gives more attention to the primary and JHS than the preschool. It is like the primary and JHS is first before the preschool.

In more of a confirmation to the fact that the structures that are dilapidated is what is given to the preschool,

Mrs Manu (HT) revealed that:

The Metropolitan Assembly has managed to put up certain structures for the primary and the JHS, so those classrooms which were formerly used by the primary and the JHS have been given to the kindergartens.

Madam Grace (CS) appeared to a differing view on the infrastructural provision by the government. She said:

I don't think the government wants to discriminate as such. The issue is that all the infrastructure cannot be provided at the same time so as and when they are provided, they are given to the schools. But some of the ECE centres also use newly constructed buildings so we shall get there.

Quite clearly, the responses seem to provide evidence to the fact that perception influences behaviour. The responses appear to suggest that parents who appreciate the criticality of early years experiences give the due attention and those who have different views also behave as such. Likewise, teachers who are of the opinion that although learners at the early childhood level are young but they still have some knowledge that can be built on, they use that knowledge while others seem to do all the talking by themselves because to them, the children don't have much to offer. The responses also indicate how the perception of headteachers influences their attitude towards the calibre of teachers they posted to the early childhood level.

There appears to be a "blame game" according to the responses. That is, teachers blaming parents, coordinator blaming headteachers and teachers and headteachers blaming the government, as not having a positive perception about ECE provision and possibly not appropriately providing for it. What appears to be interesting is that, participant's responses suggest that they know what constitutes QECE but how they were providing it appears to be different. Discussions on the findings are presented in the ensuing sections.

DISCUSSION

The discussion is presented in line with the research questions. It covers findings relating to the criticality of early years experiences and how perception influences behaviour.

Stakeholders' perception about the criticality of early years and QECE provision

The findings establish participants' appreciation of criticality of early years as the foundation for later

education. The findings seem to align well with Slutsky and Pistorova (2010) and UNICEF (2020) that experiences through QECE provide a foundation for a better future outcome. The findings further agree with what research has already documented that the brain continues to develop beyond age 5, Fischer (2012) and that children are not born knowing the difference, for instance, between black and white, rough and smooth, cold and hot; despite their inborn knowledge that makes them innately creative beings and which also suggests that they are not born empty minded (Lilley, 1967). According to Froebel, those differences are better learned through QECE.

The quality of the teacher however, can be argued to be developed through the professional training he/she has received. This presupposes that in determining the quality of a teacher, the specific training he/she has received in ECE should feature prominently (Oppong Frimpong, 2020; Yavuz and Güzel, 2020; Early et al., 2007). From the findings, having general training in teaching is not enough for somebody to teach at the early years stage. Instead, apart from the general training in teaching, the person should have a specific training in ECE in order to understand children's behaviour and how they learn (Lerkanen et al., 2012). This specific training in ECE is expected to enable the teacher to adopt appropriate pedagogy in delivering his/her lesson (Yavuz and Güzel, 2020).

A pedagogy a teacher adopts determines whether he/she will have time for those learners who may lag behind in what is being taught or not (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). By grouping, the teacher will possibly be able to identify a group or an individual in a group who may need extra tuition or attention and be able to offer that help. Another benefit that emanated through teachers training was appropriate selection and use of TLMs. Children learn through what they see so ECE classrooms should be 'print rich'. What this implies is that, an ECE classroom which does not have these TLMs and play items, children's academic performance can be negatively affected (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Pianta et al., 2009).

How the perception of stakeholders influenced the provision of ECE

This study has provided evidence on how perception influenced the behaviour of the stakeholders used for the study. Literature is exhaustive on the importance of specific training of the teacher at the early years (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Pianta et al., 2009). However, similar to the findings of Lemaire et al. (2013), this study also found that teachers who were sick and felt they could not do well at the other levels were sent to the preschool. One may argue that if the teacher is not good to teach at the primary school and has not gone through any specific training in teaching at the ECE, then that teacher may not

be good as well for the preschool. Therefore, for the teacher to be posted to the preschool suggests that ECE is not too important compared to the other levels of education. Perhaps, this is why parents are not being responsible in providing the necessary materials for their children to use at school. All these in effect, could impede the quality of the ECE provision.

The findings call for advocacy on ECE to be intensified by the school. One would have expected that since children at the early childhood level are very vulnerable, they would have been provided with a well-furnished, strong and attractive infrastructure. The findings from this study however present a different situation. Buildings that are dilapidated are given to the children at the early childhood level while the new ones are given to those at the higher level. The implication is that the early childhood education is not prioritized. Perhaps, it is not so important to warrant a new building. The rippling effect is that once the place is not all that attractive, the children may not be encouraged to go to school and whilst even at school, the concentration may be on the new building (UNESCO, 2015, 2005).

Much as it could be appreciated that efforts are being made at providing appropriate infrastructure for all levels, the influence of perception appears to be so much evident. If truly the needed infrastructure cannot be provided to all levels at the same time, then a question of interest will be why not start with the early childhood level for the subsequent infrastructure to be provided to the other higher levels? After all, that is where education begins. All these point to the fact that the early childhood level indeed plays a second fiddle. This seemingly perception of unimportant early childhood education extends to the parents. They want to have more time for their work and pay more attention to the children at the JHS and primary level therefore those at the early childhood level can wait. All these strongly imply that the perception stakeholders have about early childhood education is that it doesn't matter that much so it can wait.

The findings show that the perception stakeholders have about early childhood education greatly influenced how they provided it (Robbins, 2008). Perhaps what needs to be done, through a further study is to establish why some of the participants perceived early years to be critical and identified some important factors that constitute quality ECE provision but still did not endeavor themselves to that quality provision. There is therefore the need for further studies on what is accounting for the difference between what they know to be the ideal way of providing ECE and what they were actually doing.

The pattern of the findings strikes a chord that every effort should be made at getting the "right people" (those who truly appreciate the criticality of early childhood education) to be providing the early childhood education.

Having established that the experiences of an individual's early years have a significant impact on the

entire life of that person in later years, the researcher maintains that developing a comprehensive QECE program that can have a lasting positive effect on the individual's later life should be a matter of priority to every nation, particularly a developing one like Ghana. However, the researcher claims that achieving this height will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders irrespective of religious background, political affiliation, ethnic orientation, socio-economic or educational background.

Governments are doing their best but it seems that attention is not yet given to ECE. Perhaps, the critical role ECE plays in the early years of learners, in terms of action, is not yet realised and so there is not much commitment. It could also possibly be that governments are very much aware of the importance of ECE but are rather constrained in terms of funds as to how much they can provide for the preschool. Priority is therefore, needed to be set to enable the desired attention to be given to all the levels of education, particularly ECE. Aside these, the quality of ECE could not be realised at once. Efforts should therefore be made at getting a policy/plan which is geared towards achieving quality over a period of time. The plan/policy should clearly stipulate what would be of a priority (e.g. training of teachers, provision of infrastructure, provision of TLMs and play equipment) at any point in time. This will enable the success of such implementation to be monitored and evaluated for the necessary amendments to be made.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, this study has been able to achieve the set objectives by establishing the criticality of the experiences at the early years as being the foundation upon which the higher levels of education could thrive. It is clear from the study that quality early childhood education cannot be achieved through a lip service. In other words, it cannot be achieved in a vacuum and that the pedagogy used should be child friendly, infrastructure should be developmentally appropriate and teachers who are specifically trained in early childhood education should facilitate learning at that level.

This study has established that children have the potentials of learning what they are exposed to. This appears to indicate that children are competent from birth and they are not passive receptors of teacher-generated knowledge. This notwithstanding, they are equally faced with the challenge of making a choice from what they are exposed to. Although children are exposed to a lot of behaviours and they have to make a choice, they are not able to make the right choice but it is their experience with QECE that enlightens them to make an informed choice. This means that if they are not exposed to QECE, they will not be able to make the right choice and this will negatively affect them in the future.

Moreover, the study conclusive on the fact that how

early childhood education was perceived greatly influenced the efforts put in, the commitment made and the priorities set for its provision. This being the case, attention should be paid to those who are and or will be assigned to ECE provision in any form so that the person will have the right perception for better ECE provision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that more advocacy should be done to create more awareness among stakeholders and the general public for them to embrace ECE as important and critical, laying the foundation for future education. ECE should rather be given special attention by the Government and other stakeholders. Importantly, given that the study's findings suggest that ECE is literally forgotten, as it is subsumed in the Basic school, it is proposed, through this study, that it should be detached completely from the primary and basic school. Arguably, this would enable it to be "remembered" and be given the due attention.

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