

Quality in Research and Development in Early Childhood Education a Case of Southern Africa

Dr S.K.Thwala

University of Swaziland,
sskthwala@uniswa.sz

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n20p1720

Abstract

Early Childhood education and development has an interesting history dating back to the early philosophers, psychologists and sociologists. In Greece, philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others were involved in the education of the child. In Switzerland Pestalozzi did the same. In German Friedrich Froebel who is regarded as the father of preschool did the same. However, in Southern Africa the field of early childhood Education is relatively new compared to old established fields of Education. The staff in this field is also relatively new. This has resulted in lecturers facing challenges of quality education and quality research output. This paper explores the concept of quality assurance and quality control in education and lends insight into the role of research and innovative projects as a tool for quality development in Early Childhood Education. It reveals that quality in early childhood depends on quality in the universities. The paper suggests a need for a baseline research that will seek a better understand of human capacity needs of the countries in Southern Africa in order to design appropriate professional development training programmes. Greater attention must be given to empirical studies related to early childhood Education and development in Southern Africa.

Keywords: Early childhood, Quality, Development, Research, Education

1. Background

Early Childhood education and development has an interesting history dating back to the early philosophers, psychologists and sociologists. In Greece, philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others were involved in the education of the child. Plato in particular was concerned to educate primarily for 'philosopher kings' and was less concerned with the ordinary population of children. In Switzerland Pestalozzi worked through a carefully thought through set of practices based upon a clear philosophy of how desirable traits could be developed in children. In Germany, Friedrich Froebel developed what was probably the most carefully thought through practice for early child education based upon a clear ideology of child hood and the importance of the mother –child relationship. Although Froebel is often referred to as pantheistic in his beliefs about man's relationship with nature he was a committed Christian and his theory of childhood education was designed to ensure that children grew up as good Christian men and women. He is often regarded as the father of the 'play way' in early education because of the importance he attached to children's direct experience and in particular the significance of their interaction with nature.

The later emergence of the 'nursery garden' is attributable to Froebel's work since he expressed the oneness of education within and outside the nursery. The expression 'kindergarten' is directly related to the way in which Froebel thought about the importance of nature and the natural world in children's education. The earliest preschools in Europe and the USA were influenced by Froebelian thinking. Whilst he is often referred to as the father of pre-schooling the philosophy of practice has also been considerably influenced by the writings of John Dewey the American philosopher and pragmatist who viewed early education as an opportunity to develop skills and attributes appropriate to the social and cultural context of their lives. In this sense Dewey is also seen as a champion of learning through play although his clearly held views on the role of the teacher would have been less accepting of unstructured play. The role of the teacher was to lead and help children direct their psychological impulses towards important goals. Some contemporary play theorists would not necessarily agree with Dewey. All of the early pioneers of early education saw significance in developing interests that would act as motivators to learning. The teacher's task was to create environments in which children's interest would be stimulated and nurtured. In many of the industrialized countries of the world, concepts of childhood were relatively slow to emerge and sociology of childhood is essentially a 20th century phenomena. The development of educational and caring services for preschool age children was stimulated in the UK by two separate strands of social purpose. One concentrated on providing middle class children with an early educational experience and was heavily

influenced by Froebelian thinking. The other strand emerged as a social enterprise by charitable agencies to provide for the care and education of the poor, the disadvantaged and destitute. In the latter case, meals, baths and medical attention was made available to children of the urban poor – but only a small proportion of those that needed it. The social enterprise did nevertheless act as a model for nursery services that developed more widely during the Second World War. Whilst the countries with low economies work to provide universal primary education and expand preschool services on meagre budgets it has to be remembered that services for all children of preschool age is very much a late 20thC development in Britain as elsewhere. Such services are still supported by private playgroups, early year's centres and day nurseries.

In Southern Africa the field of early childhood Education is relatively new compared to other established fields of Education. Staff in this field is also relatively new, inexperienced and not inevitably schooled in the modern principles of early education. The development of preschool and nursery education worldwide was stimulated in the 1960s following a series of reports from national commission and committees of enquiry which embraced the new knowledge emerging from developmental psychology and studies of social disadvantage. These studies, initially in the USA and UK essentially noted the loss of human potential associated with young children being raised in conditions of material, social and psychological disadvantage and hence the need to intervene positively to ameliorated the effects of disadvantage. Early intervention – where early could mean very early indeed – was based upon the new insights to development that indicated that by the age of 5 years a significant degree of children's cognitive and psychological development had taken place. Language and communicative competence had already been acquired in measure; attitudes were being formed and psychological stability influence for good or ill. The ensuing emphasis on early intervention inevitably shone light on the likely value of preschool education - initially as a compensatory mechanism for disadvantaged children – but ultimately for all children. Until this point little academic attention had been given to preschool education by education researchers in Universities and elsewhere. By the early 1970's in the UK there was no effective research literature on the effects of preschool provision on later school achievement – mainly because it was a non-statutory form of provision. Universities were not involved with the training of teachers for preschool provision - and such as existed was carried out in a relatively small number of teacher training institutions which were neither committed to research nor resourced to carry out research.

In the past 30 or so years, research into the field of early child hood and preschool provision has increased exponentially and so too has the dissemination of knowledge relating to new practices and new pedagogies. The investment in research has promoted the spread of a new ethical code – included within which is the dissemination and publication of research through different media. There is now a worldwide acceptance of an ethical code which incorporates not just the right to publish but the expectation of publication of the outcomes of enquiry and research into children and children's services - especially where the research has been funded through public money.

This expectation and its outcomes in terms of articles in academic journals, books, newsprint and on-line sources has in turn generated a vast quantity of print based knowledge which has stimulated a commensurate growth in the number and focus of Journals and the emergence of increasingly specific professional readership groups. A linked issue is the requirement on faculty members of universities worldwide to publish their research – this requirement being linked to promotion and tenure. For young members of university staff this requirement often appears a difficult and sometimes daunting prospect when set alongside the usual burdens of teaching, marking and administrative duties. In recent years there has been a developed recognition that young staff needs mentoring - not simply as new members to an honourable profession but as future researchers and writers, who will contribute to the development of knowledge in their field of expertise,

According to Woodhead and Blatchford (2009) there are many high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programmes, but the programmes available to the world's poorest young children are often barely 'good-enough', some are of very poor quality by any standards. Focusing on enrolment makes for hollow statistics, unless basic quality is assured for all children. Woodhead and Blatchford further argue that ensuring quality is built on effective governance starting with national governments and permeating down to responsible authorities at every level. There is, therefore, a need to work on improving both the quantity and quality of research work produced by ECDE institutions. One way of ensuring the quality of a product is to provide a skilled workforce. In the case of the ECDE institutions this means ensuring that appropriate research skills are acquired by lecturers in the universities. Acquiring a skill takes time, let alone putting that skill into productive use.

This paper focuses on Quality in Research and Development in Early Childhood Education, this entails that lectures have to look at themselves and the quality of training they offer to future teachers. Needless to say: quality in early childhood depends on quality in the universities. This paper looks through the whole process, starting with three sets of criteria for quality, learning organization, research and innovative projects as a tool for quality in early childhood

development and education.

2. Definition of Quality

Quality is a very complex term to define in one sentence or one feature. Nguluka (2007) points out that quality can be seen as the degree of goodness or value of a school or characteristics of how good or bad that thing is. The meaning also stretches to the features observed in something in comparison with others. According to Gunnestad (2008) quality is not a place where we arrive; it is rather a dynamic and ongoing process. Wood head and Blatchford (2009) refer to quality early childhood education as the standards that we see in different programmes designed to facilitate early childhood learning and development and how much they achieve their intentions.

2.1 Quality assurance and quality control

Whenever the issue of quality of a product is raised two expressions come to mind. The expressions are *quality assurance* and *quality control*. These terms are borrowed from the manufacturing industry. The process of producing a product must be managed. Firstly, the manufacturer must have in mind specific quality expectations, which will satisfy the customer, the consumer of the product. Secondly, a proactive plan to meet the identified expectations must be put in place, thus, we have quality control and quality assurance activities. Quality assurance on the other hand refers to quality related activities associated with the creation of the project deliverables (Nyakutse 2010). Quality control is used to verify that the deliverables are of acceptable quality. If quality assurance activities are not in place, the end product will not be what we expect it to be. Exposing and training individuals in research skills is a quality assurance measure aimed at ensuring that the quality of research papers produced meet the expected standard. So, both quality assurance and quality control are important in ensuring that in the end a quality product is produced. Applying these two concepts to research, the peer reviewing of research papers is a quality control measure while training in research methods is putting in place the activities (quality assurance) necessary to ensure the quality of an end product. For researchers, keen to improve the quality of their research papers, the question is; *'What kind of activities do they need to engage in to come out with quality products?'*

2.2 Quality in teacher training/universities

In relation to the quality of our teacher training we can identify 3 sets of criteria of quality namely; input criteria, process criteria and output or result criteria (Gunnestad, 2008)

2.2.1 Input criteria

Input criteria includes resources that are put into the universities: qualification of lecturers, quality curriculum, examinations, books in the library, classroom facilities to name a few. The institutions have to ask themselves the following questions; do they have qualified lecturers in the field of early childhood Education and what can be do to improve that? How is the curriculum? When it was last revised? Is the curriculum reflecting updated knowledge in early childhood education? Is it well designed? Concerning examination, are the examinations relevant for the needed knowledge or also understanding of theory and educational processes in Early Childhood Development and Education? If the questions are answered one will be able to give some guidelines on how to develop quality in these important areas.

2.2.2 Process Criteria

Process Criteria is about what processes students are involved in to develop abilities to understand and teach children with different abilities using a lot of different types of teaching methods and activities. Are students mostly listening to lecturers in classrooms and assumed that they develop the necessary skills and attitudes by just listening? Are they just expected to copy, or they are expected also to read and reflect themselves, to discuss in class, to search for information in different ways, and to do things practical? How are they prepared and followed up during teaching practice?

2.2.3 An output Criteria

An output Criteria is about the results of training. One of the outputs is examination. One should ask himself whether the

examinations are asking questions for knowledge and skills that are relevant and important for the work of a preschool teacher. Another thing is the quality of the teachers that are graduating: are they able to inspire children to develop different gifts in their personality? The quality of teachers is highly dependent on the processes they have been involved in during the training. Have they been made to understand and explore play or have just been told the importance of play? Knowledge about child development is important, have they been given a chance to observe and describe children of different ages or they just read about child development?

As stated by Gunnestad (2008) that quality is an ongoing process, a school/university that is good will in a few years be quite poor if one is just replicating the teaching and procedures of previous years. Lecturers/ teachers need to add new knowledge to develop their understanding, teaching methods, curriculum, and need to improve their understanding of children.

2.3 *Learning organizations*

The famous educational researcher Senge (2006) has presented an interesting view about learning organizations. He says organizations can be a preschool or a teacher training. A learning organization is an organization where: "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" The question is: are our schools, universities, networks learning organization? You may ask yourselves are we developing a common understanding, are we moving somewhere as a group? A learning organization is an organization where the staff develops and continually expands the capacity to create the desired results. Senge points out that this depends on individuals. Organizations that learn do so only through individuals who learn, have a vision and desire to achieve, to develop, to find out and to serve the world. Senge has identified 3 characteristics of learning organization namely: shared vision, team learning and system thinking.

2.3.1 *Shared Vision*

In learning organizations the leaders have a clear vision of the work. However, these leaders need to have or develop the ability to spread the vision to the rest of the staff: talking about a shared vision for the university, network and the department the vision for the network for instance could be to work together to develop a high standard of Early Childhood Training relevant for the Southern African situation, and to help each other to implement such standards in all the universities.

2.3.2 *Team learning*

A learning organization is characterized by team working and team learning. Team learning starts with dialogue, to be able to develop the capacity of thinking together. The word dialog, from Greek *dia-logos*, means a free flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individuals. To establish a fellowship where people feel comfortable to share their thinking, understanding and aspirations is a task of the leader, but it also takes cooperation and will to participate from everybody. But a leader has a crucial role for this to happen in our universities. It is not enough to say I have a vision for the department, if the head of the department does not share the vision the department is heading to nowhere. When staff members have a common vision and staff are able to have a dialog, then they will also be able to act together to improve quality to build the department or the institution into the department that makes a difference, an institution that graduates students who later will make a difference in so many lives.

2.3.3 *System thinking*

The main point in the theory of learning organizations is system thinking; for example the ability to see the school as a dynamic unit and as a whole. Sometimes lecturers only see their own part or certain elements like: the subject they teach, the examination, the curriculum and teaching practice. The subjects need to be seen and understood as a whole, and it is important to be able to understand the contribution of different subjects in universities or teacher training in relation to the aim which is to educate skilled early childhood teachers. As a specialist in early childhood education one cannot do it alone. For example, when one teaches about stories as an important teaching method he needs to refer to the drama lecturer who will give more practical training in dramatizing stories. Also one cannot work on improving the exams without looking at teaching methods. If it is thought that the exams should be more focused on understanding than reproducing,

then this must be reflected in the way lecturers teach. Quality teaching practice must also relate to the teaching in different subjects in the university. What is taught at the university must be relevant for the teaching practice and students' experiences should be brought into the teaching. The training should be seen and understood as a dynamic unit, and as a whole Gunnestad (2008).

2.4 How can the universities and departments become a learning organization?

The universities should strive to be learning organization that continuously develop and increase in ability to produce the teachers that the children need and deserve. Mediocre teachers who kill the curiosity and creativity of children have no place in learning organization. Teachers who are needed are those who have seen something who have understood something about child development and learning, and who have developed the abilities to bring forth the best in children's abilities. Research and development/innovative projects are a way of developing a university into a learning organization this can also be done by joint research work and projects.

2.5 Research as a tool for quality development in early childhood education

Best and Khan (1998) define research as a systematic and objective recording and analysis of controlled observations that may lead to the development of generalizations, principles, and theories resulting in predictions and ultimate control of many events that may be consequences or causes of specific activities .

Quality research in ECDE requires that the researcher pays attention to the basics of research. The researcher should ask himself/herself several questions some of the questions are:

- Does the theme fit in the field of Early Childhood Development and Education?
- Is the title concise and descriptive of the content?
- Did the author formulate the research problem/aim, and motivate the value of the research?
- Did the author undertake a literature study of sufficient extent and depth?
- Is the methodological explanation satisfactory?
- Is the data collection acceptable?
- Is the processing of the data satisfactory?
- Did the author deduce the conclusions logically from the collected and processed data, and do they answer the research problem?
- Do recommendations for theory construction and for the improvement of practice follow logically from the conclusions?

If all these are done according to set standards on research, then quality assurance activities would have been carried out and hopefully the quality of the product would be good and up to expected standard..

2.6 Innovative projects as a tool for quality development in early childhood education

According to Gunnestad (2003) innovative project is a type of research where one would like to use the research as a tool for developing a field for example a preschool or early childhood Teacher Training. It is a process of starting a process in your work that will lead to changes. It will create a deeper understanding and insight in the work and lead to improved way of working for instance a better way of teaching, better ways of organizing the training, better ways of using resources, co-operation between teachers and parents.

Research and innovative projects are less governed by the researchers than ordinary research. It is about involving oneself in a process that may lead to change. In this case involvement of the users is important. A research and development project is only successful to the extent that one is able to mobilize the users. Users in relation to a preschool or Early Childhood Centre are: the staff and the children, sometimes parents depending on what the project is all about. In relation to a training institution the staff and students are the users. Research and innovative project could be any area that that one is offered, but feels does not know enough or wants to improve or it could be something found to be interesting and want to find out more about or develop for example the cooperation between the preschool/Early Childhood Centre and the home or how free play periods are organized in preschools.

Research and innovative projects can also be started aimed at improving the universities, making them more relevant for the job students are being qualified for. One may wish to investigate how to make students read more during their studies, how to make teaching practice a fruitful learning period for students, how to create a greater variation in

teaching methods in the universities, how can teaching be made relevant to the work in preschools and many others.

2.7 How can innovative projects be started in universities?

Gunnestad (2008) identifies 4 stages in which research and developmental projects can be seen these are the phase of problem formulation, registration of the situation- establishing a base line, the phase of implementation, the phase of evaluation and keeping the result.

2.7.1 The phase of problem formulation

Gunnestad states that this is an important phase that one should give some time and attention. If the Head of department or a lecturer have seen a problem or weakness that he wants to change or has an area of interest that he wants to involve the staff into. It is however, important to involve the colleagues in selecting the area of interest or need. He could call a meeting and discuss what area the department should focus upon: discuss what they think could be interesting to work with as a group. People could mention different areas or themes. One can then decide to select one of the first projects to work on the others may come later. The theme of interest should be worked upon to make it into a question. For example, one theme could be that students are not reading books as part of their study. When it is formulate as a question, it could be: How to make students use literature reading an important part of their study? Other examples could be: How to promote a closer cooperation between the university and the preschools? Or How to make play a more varied and interesting experience for children? How to make lectures in the university to be more relevant to the preschool education?

2.7.2 Registration of the situation- establishing a base line

In this phase he states that those involved discuss and find out how is the situation before the process begins. Take for instance the issue of reading by students. They might want to know how much the students are reading from the reading list. If it is on free play they need to go and observe for a week or two: what is happening during free play. Are children active with a variety of activities or just the same all the time? Do both boys and girls have access to the different types of toys? Is the staff involved with children during free play? It is important that all relevant staff can be involved in observation and give some contribution to the description of the situation; to find out and register the situation before the start of the project. It is important in order to see the need of the project and also in order to be able to see if progress is made.

2.7.3 The phase of finding measures and to implement them

Gunnestad (ibid) says this phase starts with discussing what one can do in order to improve the situation. What steps can be taken? If the problem has been formulated like: How to make students to use reading from the booklist as part of their study? And it has been registered that students read very little in most of the subjects, then what could be done about it? First question to ask is literature available? Can literature be made available and compulsory to buy for students? Should students be given a short test or assignment after finishing teaching from a certain book? Then a plan on how to implement that should be made and meet again after sometime to see how it worked. Evaluation is needed on what was effective and see if you making progress.

2.7.4 The evaluation phase

In this phase the situation is evaluated and compared with what it was before it programme was started. Lectures should ask themselves the following questions; have we learned something about how to make students read more? Have we been able to make them read more? Here it is important to discuss: how do they keep the results that have been achieved during this period. How to avoid relapses into what the situation was before the project started. After sometime the staff may want to go one to start another project. If all these are done accordingly, then quality assurance activities would have been carried out and hopefully the quality of the product would be good and up to expected standard.

2.8 Challenges of quality control and quality assurance

Throughout Southern Africa, the issue of quality control and quality assurance is problematic; this is due to the fact that Early Childhood Education is left to the hands of private sector. In the area of Early childhood Education the issues of accreditation and quality control and assurance are complex. Many private organizations question the mandate and authority of government of their institutions because they are private and no support they are getting from government. They wonder how can government has a say over their institutions if she has not offered support. Furthermore, most of the government officials are not trained in early childhood education. Such government officials have limited experience to assure quality early childhood education (Nsibande, 2008).

ECDE practitioners typically have minimal education and pre-service training and are relatively poorly remunerated, which often results in poor quality. There is a lack of systematic planning and legislative frameworks for early childhood services in most countries leading to a vacuum in terms of standards, indicators and regulatory guidance which are often drivers for improving quality (Okengo, 2010).

The challenge of quality control and quality assurance in early childhood education is also heightened by the fact that there is no accreditation body ensuring quality education. This question of who accredits and where authority lies is a challenge for African governments, institutions and students. In light of the above, they tend to be a tension between private sector and government officials. Students who enroll in institutions of higher education enroll at their own risk because the government questions the authenticity of their certificates; also government fails to pay their salaries upon graduating (Dlamini 2012). According to Nsibande (2008) Early Childhood Care and Development is an area where everyone feels should have a say. There are a variety of sectors concerned with young child. The problem may be on the ownership because every sector has specific mandates on the services they provide and that does not often lead to integrated programming; there is lack of awareness of what other sectors are and each sector has its own set of goals. It is possible that one sector is addressing one dimension of child's needs goal while other needs are left unattended.

Importing models from developed countries without a thorough analysis of the local context, Evans (1997) suggests that principles and guidelines from proven models can certainly be taken into considerations in creating new programmes, but the specific design and implementation strategy must be developed with a full awareness of the culture and community to be served.

3. Conclusions

Although ECDE has not received the attention it deserves, there has been an increase in the calls for provision of ECDE across the globe. To date there is a growing public awareness of the importance of quality early childhood education in children's development. This general awareness provides a good buffer for this agenda. With the expanding development of ECDE awareness the issue will continue to cause problems. It will increasingly become an international problem; therefore, collaboration between all stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, school personnel, administrators and legislators across the world) is needed in order for nations to take realistic and globally respected actions. Secondly, social inequity is a serious concern amongst many population, no sector is more unequal than the ECDE sector and there is a growing recognition that an effective way to combat these inequities is to ensure that early childhood care education is offered to every child.

Empirical studies related to ECDE in Southern Africa are limited; therefore, greater attention must be given to it. There is a need for a baseline research that seeks to better understand the human capacity needs of the countries in Southern Africa in order to design an appropriate professional development training programmes, and understand parent hopes for their children as well as their attitudes and beliefs about early childhood. Capacity building of local researchers should also be prioritised through the identification of opportunities within the region for the creation of in-depth, longitudinal studies in order to generate evidence for longer-term change and to contribute to a wider body of knowledge about child development emanating from the region.

References

- Best, J. W. & Kahn, J. V. (1998). Research in Education. Boston: Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data.
- Dlamini , P.C. (2013). Examination of the nature of early childhood care and education in rural HHohho Region: Issue, Quality of Resources and Service development activities. Unpublished Masters Thesis in Educational Foundations and Management: University of Swaziland
- Evans, J.L. (1997). Breaking down the barriers: creating integrated early childhood programmes. consultative group on early childhood

and care and development

- Gunnestad, A. (2003). The child vulnerable and resourceful. A paper presented at the annual conference for Early childhood Trainers. Zanzibar, Tanzania
- Gunnestad, A. (2008). Quality in research and development in early childhood education. A paper presented at the 10th Network Conference, Kitwe Zambia
- Leedy, D. and Omrod, J. E. (2005). *Practical research. Planning and Design*. (8th Edition). Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall. New Jersey: Upper Saddle River.
- Nguluka (2007). Quality in early childhood education. Key note Address 10th Network Conference, Kitwe Zambia
- Nsiband N. (2008). National integrated plan for early childhood care and development. Mbabane: Ministry of Education
- Okengo L. (2010). *'Early childhood care and education: An overview of Southern Africa'* OSISA
- Senge, P. (2006). The fifth discipline: the art and practice of learning organization. New York: Doubleday/Currency
- Woodhead M. and Blatchford I. (2009). Early childhood in focus: effective early Childhood programmes. London: Open University