

What Do Preschool and Grade One Teachers say about School Readiness and Transition from Early Childhood Education to Grade One? A Case of Selected Schools in Zambia's Chongwe and Lusaka Districts

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Abstract Globally, many countries are facing an unprecedented learning crisis and Zambia is not an exception. Children are getting through the education system without the acquisition of basic literacy, numeracy and other critical skills and competencies [1,2]. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation with many schools experiencing prolonged school closures, with Early Childhood learning centers being the first to close and last to open. The World Bank mentions that COVID-19 school related closures and other disruptions have worsened the learning poverty. Despite several studies showing the great benefits that attending ECE has not only on children's school readiness and individual development but also on the economic development of their countries, the ECE sector is still underdeveloped. Access to quality ECE is acutely low. In Zambia, less than 35% of grade one entrants had ECE experience [3]. If this situation is left unaddressed, we risk losing a whole generation of children with no basic literacy and numeracy skills which are critical in leading a productive and meaningful life. This study was aimed at examining how ECE supports school readiness and transition by analyzing preschool and grade one teacher views and perceptions on school readiness and transition from ECE to grade one. The study, which was part of a broader research on the role of ECE in promoting successful transitions and school readiness revealed that while there were many similarities between preschool teachers and grade one teacher views on importance of ECE and factors that could positively enhance transition and school readiness, there were also significant differences on what skills both teachers felt were important determinants of school readiness.

Keywords: school readiness, transitions, early childhood education, preschool, teacher's perceptions, preschool teachers, grade one teachers

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1. Introduction

The important role that Early Childhood Education plays in preparing children for formal schooling cannot be overemphasized. Many studies worldwide have shown that high quality Early Childhood programs can lead to higher levels of school enrolment and educational performance which ultimately may lead to better job opportunities later in life [4,5]. Early childhood education has proven to positively impact the quality of school experience for children in primary and basic education [6]. Transition from ECE to early primary is a critical period in a child's educational journey and the experiences of children and the support they receive during this phase has great implications for their future learning and adjustment.

Transition can also be a challenging time as most children usually move from relatively warm, familiar and caring child-centred environments at ECE to a potentially intimidating and less flexible formal school when they enrol in grade one. The transition period is a critical period for young children's social and academic development [7,8,9,10,11]. Smooth transitions can help children to feel secure and at ease in unfamiliar environments. Research has shown that children who feel suitable, relaxed and well-adjusted in preschool are much more likely to be ready for school [12,13].

Several scholars propose that school readiness should encompass not only the children's ability to meet every day social and practical challenges but also key aspects of social support [14]. Different scholars emphasize different aspects of school readiness, however, a more common paradigm considers three interconnected dimensions

namely, Ready children, which focuses on children's learning and development, Ready schools which focuses on the school environment along with practices that foster and support smooth transition for children into primary school and lastly, Ready families which involves parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning and development and transition to school. All three dimensions are important and should work in tandem as school readiness requires interface between individuals, families, and systems [4].

Zambia has made progress in promoting ECE. In 2015, a new Directorate responsible for ECE in the Ministry of Education was established. Since then, the sector has recorded many successes notably, a steady increase in the number of grade one entrants with ECE experience from 15.4% in 2014 to 26% % in 2017 and 29.4% in 2018 to 32.2% in 2019. Other developments include the establishment of ECE centres/classrooms, recruitment, and deployment of ECE teachers, and integration of ECE curriculum within the National Curriculum framework of 2013. However, despite these achievements, Zambia still has a long way to go to ensure universal access to ECE as the subsector faces many challenges which affect both access and quality such as low funding allocation to ECE, lack of a comprehensive ECE policy, few trained ECE teachers, inequitable provision of ECE services between rural and urban areas and lack of adequate and appropriate teaching and learning materials [5,15].

Teachers are the single most important factor affecting how much children learn. Despite this importance, there is inadequate literature in Zambia on views of preschool teachers and grade one teachers on transition from ECE to grade one. The views that teachers have on school readiness and transitions impacts the way they handle children and potentially this affects how children in ECE and grade one experience school learning. Perceptions that teachers have of their students have far reaching impacts and teacher expectations of children can make or break that child's success in school. This study focused on analyzing views and perceptions that preschool teachers and grade one teachers have on ECE and the transition to grade one. This data will help in providing relevant and contextually appropriate recommendations to policy makers and practitioners to help improve policy and practice for the ECE sector.

2. Method

2.1. Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study was cross-sectional, targeting 25 (n=58) preschool teachers and grades one and two teachers drawn from seven (7) preschools and seven (7) primary schools across two districts in Zambia, namely Chongwe and Lusaka districts. Purposive sampling was used as a sampling technique mainly for two reasons. Firstly, selecting preschools 'annexed' or closer to the primary schools allowed the researcher to gain indepth knowledge about the school readiness and transition practices amongst preschools and their corresponding primary schools, this phenomenon was critical to the research.

Secondly, the total number of preschools in the target districts was very small, therefore using another sampling technique could have still targeted the same schools.

Questionnaires and interviews were used to elicit feedback from teachers on their perspectives on school readiness and transition from early childhood to early grades. The questionnaires comprised of open-ended questions which allowed the researcher to see issues from the perspectives of the respondents. Themes in the questionnaires included curriculum/pedagogy practices, parental involvement, interaction between preschool and grade one teachers.

3. Results

3.1. Is Preschool Education Important?

When asked to state whether preschool was important or not, both preschool and grade one teachers believed that attending preschool was important as it provided an opportunity for children to learn how to write, read and identify letters of the alphabet and learn socialization skills such as making friends. Grade one teachers indicated that they observed the following skills in children who had attended preschool prior to enrolling in grade one; knowledge of sounds and letters, ability to hold a book and pencil properly, better eye coordination, more sociable and able to copy work from the black board.

3.2. Pedagogical Practices at Preschools and Grade One

An investigation into the methods and practices of teaching and learning at preschools revealed that teachers undertook various activities with their learners. A typical day at a preschool included learning pre-math, English, letter naming, counting, sounds, singing and reciting poems. Some teachers classified activities into two categories-indoor and outdoor activities. In-door activities included playing with toys, storytelling while outdoor activities included playing ball games, singing, dancing and free play. On the other hand, a typical day included learning literacy, numeracy and other curriculum subjects (science, creative and technology studies). Grade one teachers also mentioned doing activities such as singing, dancing and encouraging free play. Results showed similarities between the activities undertaken by preschool teachers and grade one teachers and the main differences being that Preschool activities seemed more varied, and more play based.

3.3. Curriculum Knowledge

To investigate the extent to which preschool teachers were aware about the curriculum for grade one and vice versa, both categories of teachers were asked to indicate what the similarities and differences were between the two curricula and the table below summarizes the findings. Results showed that majority (over 60%) of teachers were aware about what was taught in either preschool or grade one and most mentioned that the material covered was similar and only differed in level of complexity.

Table 1. Teacher perceptions on similarities and differences between Preschool and Grace Curriculum

Similarities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Both curricula require learners to be taught in chinyanja ○ Pre-reading and pre-writing skills are taught ○ Similar weekly schedule for language and literacy ○ letter sounds are similar in both curriculums.
Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Work content is the same for both levels, grade one work tends to be more complex. ○ Preschool work is more play based- 60% play, 40% academic. ○ Preschools learn one sound per week while grade ones do 2 sounds per week. ○ Grade ones copy from the board whereas preschool trace using what the teacher provides to them, ○ Grade one all subjects are taught in English while in preschool a combination of Nyanja and English are used

3.4. What Successful Transition Looks Like

Preschool and Grade teachers had similar views regarding indicators of successful transition and school readiness. For example, both groups of teachers felt that being able to sound letters, having arithmetic competencies such as ability to count numbers, ability to hold a pencil and a book were important indicators of successful transitions. Further, both groups of teachers mentioned the need for learners to acquire pre-reading skills. Results also showed some differences in the level of importance they attached to these indicators. For example, grade one teachers did not emphasise social skills, while preschool teachers didn't feel being able to write one's name was an indicator of school readiness.

Table 2. Skills that teachers proposed as a good indication of successful transition from preschool to early primary years

SKILL	Preschool Teachers	Grade One (1) Teachers
Able to write own name		√
Good handwriting	√	
Able to sound letters	√	√
Arithmetic competency (counting numbers)	√	√
Able to hold a book, pencil	√	√
Social skills- playing well with others, interacting with others	√	
Self-help skills – Toilet trained	√	
Pre-reading skills	√	√
Able to adjust to new environment		√
Problem solving	√	
Able to sing	√	

3.5. Teacher Perspectives on Promoting Successful Transition

When asked on what needed to be in place to promote successful transitions from preschool to grade 1, both groups of teachers mentioned factors that can be categorized into two groups namely school conditions/factors and curriculum related practices. For school related factors, majority of the teachers mentioned the need for availability of teaching and learning materials to ensure effective teaching and learning in schools. This finding is not surprising as observations from the research also showed that most schools seemed poorly resourced with no teaching and learning materials in sight and mostly

bare walls. Teachers also mentioned the importance of having teachers who are 'good' and teach well. It should be noted that findings on teacher qualifications and years of experience on the job indicated that over 50% of the preschool teachers had over 5 years of teaching experience and regarding the highest level of education, 55% of preschool teachers had certificates in preschool teaching, while the remaining 45% had primary teaching diplomas. On the other hand, 55% of grade one teachers had 2-3 years of work experience and majority had primary teaching diplomas and 22% had primary degrees and preschool certificates. Other school related factors that were proposed as promoting successful transitions included conducive environments, closer proximity between preschool and primary schools (annexed preschools) and more parental involvement in the child's learning. Regarding curriculum related factors, both groups of teachers mentioned that teaching should be focused on imparting literacy and numeracy skills. Preschool teachers specifically mentioned a curriculum that focuses on building learner confidence, building social and physical skills. Though both categories mentioned academic related factors, preschool teachers seemed to also emphasize the softer skills,

3.6. Communication between Preschool and Grade One Teachers

About 80% of the teachers indicated that preschool and grade one teachers met often and that these meetings were planned. 20 % of the teachers mentioned that these meetings held on an adhoc basis. When asked what was discussed during the meetings, teachers mentioned that the main topics included agreeing what competencies or skills that the preschool teachers needed to focus on with their learners to better prepare them for grade one, the teachers also discussed how former preschoolers were performing in grade one.

4. Discussion

The study revealed that there were similarities in what teachers mentioned as indicators of successful transitions and school readiness. For example, both groups of teachers believed that ability to sound letters of the alphabet, ability to count numbers, being able to hold a pencil and possession of some pre reading skills were indicators of successful transition and school readiness. Having similarities in perceptions on school readiness and transition is an important aspect as it demonstrates a strong likelihood of continuity between preschool and grade one in terms of teacher beliefs/philosophy of teaching, pedagogical approaches, teaching and learning practices. Continuity of learning between ECE and grade one is an important factor in determining long term learning [16-23].

On the other hand, despite the many similarities, there were some significant differences in how preschool teachers and grade one teachers perceived school readiness and transition. Preschool teachers emphasized more of the soft/social skills such as ability to adjust to

new places, being toilet trained, ability to make friends while for grade one teachers, they seemed to emphasize more academic oriented skills such as ability to write one's name, read and write. While these skills are important and teachers are justified to highlight these, what is of concern are the implications that these varying views may have on children's school readiness and transition process. For example, if grade one teachers believe that being ready for school means one's ability to write their name, read, write etc. they will be expecting most children to have these skills at the time of enrolling in grade one which is not always the case especially that most children are still enrolling in grade one with no preschool experience. It's important that both preschool and grade one teachers have a common understanding of what school readiness means and what support each child requires to be ready for school as well as what the schools need to have in place to be ready for the children. Having a common understanding will also ensure continuity as children move from home to preschool and to primary school. Varying views in definitions of school readiness amongst preschool and grade one teachers is a challenge that needs to be overcome, many grade one teachers have inadequate and often inaccurate knowledge of what happens in preschool, and this is true for preschool teachers as well [22].

The study revealed that though preschool teachers and grade one teachers reported having met each other during some meetings, these were often not planned. It seemed there was no formal structure or a strategy for both teachers to collaborate effectively. and this could mean a lack of understanding on the importance of cooperation between ECE and early primary school. Collaboration and communication between ECE teachers and grade one teachers is important for children's smooth transition and school readiness as this allows teachers to exchange knowledge and experiences on children's learning and ultimately better equipped to meet the demands that come with transition [23].

Language of instruction is another area that seemed not aligned between preschool and grade one. Even though it's policy that the language of instruction from preschool to grade 4 should be in the local language/language of play, some preschools still used English as a medium of instruction while grade ones used local language. Language development is an important skill for children starting school because it's the medium of communication with peers and teachers and through which they learn new skills and acquire competencies This misalignment in language of instruction is a risk factor in hindering continuity of learning. [24].

Even though teachers at ECE and grade one had similar goals for their learners in terms of what skills they needed to acquire, results revealed that there was a significant difference in curriculum and pedagogical practices. For example, preschool teaching and learning was more play-based whereas grade one teaching and learning was more focused on academics. Research on Transition and school readiness vis-à-vis curriculum lobbies for best practices play, cooperative roles and social interaction amongst children as a foundation for comprehensive development [20].

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study recommends the development of implementation guidelines on School Readiness and Transitions. Currently, School Readiness and Transitions has not been given any prominence in any of the policy documents guiding the implementation of ECE in Zambia. These should give guidance to schools on what mechanisms need to be put in place support children's transition such as creating an optimal environment that promotes learning for all children both at ECE and primary levels, creating continuity of learning from ECE to primary in terms of curriculum and pedagogical continuity.

To ensure strengthening of linkage between ECE and Primary schools, the study recommends strengthening the collaboration between ECE and early primary school teachers. The study showed dissonance between preschool teacher and grade one teacher understanding of school readiness. It's critical that both categories of teachers have the same understanding of what school readiness is and how each can help support this process. This collaboration can be achieved through many ways one being through the in-service professional development activities at school level. For example, the Ministry of Education has School Based Continuing Professional Development programs in most schools implemented through the School Programme of Inservice for the Term (SPRINT) framework, this presents a good opportunity for preschool and primary school teachers to learn and share knowledge.

6. Implications for Future Research

The concepts of school readiness and transitions are complex and this study by no means achieved delving into all the related factors, therefore the study recommends further research on the different dimensions of school readiness, for example conducting longitudinal studies is highly recommended as this will generate additional credible insights on the transition process following the same cohorts of children/teachers over time.

Further, the study recommends further research on children's role in the transition process and how their pivotal role shapes their school readiness process. Few research studies in the Zambian context have focused on getting views of children on their experience in school. Such research paradigms will contribute to more effective and inclusive policies and practices.

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