

Early Childhood Education Leadership in Tanzania: A Missing Link for Quality Good Start in Basic Education

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Abstract

Early Childhood is a foundational period in the life of every child that is very important in the growth and development of each human being. In most literature, policy documents and program interventions, Early Childhood covers the period between conceptions to eight years. It is during this period in the human life cycle that young children acquire knowledge of themselves, people around them and the environments in which they live. Early Childhood as a foundation period for future development is demanding specialized leadership training opportunities, so that those in decision making positions do not only view Early Childhood Education as an option but a sector that should be well addressed. Training opportunities, budget allocations and policy implementations are all important, but they all depend on well informed and well positioned individuals in leadership positions at all levels. In order to tap into the government initiative to improve quality basic education in Tanzania and other developing countries; investing in building capacities in Early Childhood leadership at all levels of education implementation is among the sustainable strategies of ensuring that all children have equal opportunities for quality good start in their basic education. In this study Early Childhood Leadership was operationally defined as the ability of those who are in positions of influencing decisions to do so with relevant knowledge and skills about young children. Leadership is both knowledge and skill gained through appropriate training and therefore, those entrusted with opportunities to serve young children should be well trained and supported to make sure that young children are nurtured well to realize their full potentials. The paper presents findings from a larger study conducted in Tanzania, East Africa to assess the differences between stated and implemented policies in Early Childhood Education leadership.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Education, Leadership, and policy

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1. Introduction

Early Childhood is a foundational period in the life of every child very important in the growth and development of each human being. In most literature, policy documents and program interventions, Early Childhood covers the period between conception to eight years. It is during this period in the human life cycle that young children acquire knowledge of themselves, people around them and the environments in which they live. This early knowledge lays a foundation of later development in life. For every adult to take responsibility of appropriate care; clear understanding of the importance of Early Childhood among adults is required because it gives meanings and values through which young human beings are perceived, responded to, and treated (Dune, 2008). Children who are born from poor families and poor communities are vulnerable of difficult circumstances they find themselves in. Often failure of appropriate care is associated with family failure. In fact, it is due to a leadership gap that exists in the early childhood sector.

Leadership, a term commonly known may be interpreted differently by different people in different contexts (Bakuza, 2014). It has historically been defined across two axes, one representing a sense of vision about where an organization should be headed and the second, capturing the relational work required to move the organizational participants towards that end (Murphy, 2005). Lambert (1998) views leadership in education as opportunities to “surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversation...to create actions that grow out of these new understanding” (1998 p.5-6). Specifically, to Early Childhood, leadership is reframed as a shared responsibility amongst all professionals, tertiary educational institutions, professional organizations, and those who work and interact with young children and their families (Stamopoulos, 2012; Bakuza, 2014). In additional Ho (2011) views leadership in early childhood as a shared responsibility for all early childhood professionals who must tackle educational change. Therefore, Early Childhood Leadership was operationally defined as the ability of those who are in positions of influencing decisions to do so with relevant knowledge and skills about young children. Leadership is both knowledge and skill gained through appropriate training and therefore, those entrusted with opportunities to serve young children should be well trained and supported to make sure that young children are nurtured well to realize their full potentials.

This paper takes the position that Early Childhood should be viewed as a specialized sector and the slow development and other challenges facing Early Childhood as a sector are associated with the leadership gap of people who should make decisions on resources and skills to improve the quality of care and education of young children especially those who need it most. In Tanzania, issues of capacity and perceptions of those who work in the field of ECE, which may have an impact on the quality of services, have not been brought to the spotlight. There seems to be a lack of research that links teachers, head teachers/principals and policy makers' professional and pedagogical knowledge that influence leadership practice in ECE. The study was conducted to find out leadership skills of those in charge of Early Childhood Education and the supporting structures to support the interpretation of policy to support quality start in basic education. The paper presents findings from a larger study conducted in Tanzania, East Africa to assess the differences between stated and implemented policies in Early Childhood Education leadership. Issues discussed in this paper though from the context of Tanzania; they are likely to be similar in other countries of similar characteristics.

1.1 The context of Early Childhood in developing countries

In developing countries where Early Childhood has not been well established as a sector, most interventions draw from other sector such as primary and secondary education leadership. Ho (2011) observes that since little is known about leadership and management in the local field of early childhood education (especially in developing countries), the policy and practice of preschool education "is largely based on the research and literature on primary and secondary education" (Ho, 2011p.49). There is no harm to associate Early Childhood Education and later levels of education, but it should be treated as a preparatory stage through which children are prepared for formal schooling. Early Childhood Education despite being formal, it has a lot of flexibility when compared to primary level of education.

1.2 Early Childhood Education in Tanzania

Tanzania is an example of one of the developing nations where the current status of Early Childhood Education (ECE) needs concerted efforts at all levels in order to prepare young children for formal primary education. ECE in Tanzania covers the period from birth to eight years old. These include three phases: home, childcare/preschool and the first two years of primary education. The programs for 0 to 4 years old children fall under the department of Social Welfare in the Ministry of Community Development Gender, Elderly and Special Groups. While the Education and Training Policies of 1995 and 2014 required all public primary schools in Tanzania to have Early Childhood Education class (formerly referred to as a pre-primary class) for 5-6 years children the overall enrollment in pre-primary classes has remained very low when compared to primary education enrollment. The gross enrollment rate of 5 and 6 years old in pre-primary education was 42% in 2011 and 46.1 in 2016 (URT, 2012, 2016). There have not been clear implementation plans specific to ECE in all major government intervention in education which makes it difficult to expect any significant improvement (Mtahabwa, 2010). The situation is difficult, especially at the school level where teachers are struggling with limited budgets on teaching and learning materials.

While the emphasis has been on improving primary and secondary education; less has been done to improve pre-primary education which is part of basic education in Tanzania. The consequences of ignoring ECE are now seen in the results of primary school leaving examination (PSLE) and certificate of secondary school examination (CSEE). The government reports indicates that although there have been steady increase in the enrollment in both primary and secondary schools; students' performance has continued to decline significantly. For example, the national examination results for 2012 indicated the overall performance in PSLE was 34% and for CSEE was 34% (URT; 2013). Many children in grade three and four are very poor in basic literacy skills i.e. reading writing and arithmetic. It is unfortunately that many children especially in rural areas of Tanzania where majority of children live have no access to pre-primary education. The literacy level is very poor in rural Tanzania when compared to urban areas because many children in urban areas have access at least to one year of pre-primary education prior to enrolling in grade one.

2. Literature review

2.1 Early Childhood Leadership

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the foundation of formal education in most countries and therefore it is an area that requires specialized leadership based on the importance of this level and the age of children served. When 'conceptualizing' Early Childhood leadership in New Zealand, Thornton et al. (2009) argue that although some notions of leadership from other education sectors can be applied to the early childhood sector '...the nature and context of ECE makes it unique and worthy of independent examination and support mechanisms'. They further challenge the transfer of ideas about leadership from other education sectors or drawing close comparison that 'must be carefully done because of multifaceted and diverse nature of ECE' (p.4). According to Kagan and Hallmark (2001) there are demands facing today's early childhood educators that require the cultivation not *only*

of more leaders, but more kinds of leadership. Qualities such as “the intimacy, flexibility, diversity and individualization of early childhood programmes create a decidedly different leadership context than the formality, uniformity, rigidity, and bureaucratization that has been conventionally associated with the corporate setting” (p.8). It is therefore problematic to assume that policy and practice relating to local preschool education should be drawn from the knowledge base of different educational sectors and other contexts.

In a serious way, Ho (2011) observes that since little is known about leadership and management in the local field of early childhood education (especially in developing countries), ‘the policy and practice of preschool education is largely based on the research and literature on primary and secondary education’ (Ho, 2011 p.49).

Issues of young children fall under multiple sectors such as health, social welfare, and education; and therefore, a balance of leadership is very important because of multiplicity of actors in the early years of children where leadership in an early childhood education setting becomes an integral part of other social systems operating in the unit (Nivala; 2002). This view allows to see leadership as a holistic system that consists of many different actors and when these parts of the system operate in mutual harmony, the leadership is balanced (Nivala; 2002). Therefore, early childhood leadership as a field needs specific attention from policy makers, academic institutions and field researchers (Bakuza, 2014). According to Stamopoulos (2012), leadership (in early childhood) is reframed as a shared responsibility amongst all professionals, tertiary educational institutions, professional organizations and those who work and interact with young children and their families. This view is supported by Ho (2011) who views leadership in early childhood as a shared responsibility for all early childhood professionals who must tackle educational change. She emphasizes that this model of leadership challenges those involved in change to “build on their pedagogical and professional knowledge and maintain their professional identity” (Ho; 2011 p.43).

Leadership in Early childhood may be well perceived in the ways early childhood professionals share a reciprocal process to pursue chances that lead to a desired future (Stamopoulos, 2012). According to Stamopoulos (2012), leadership is being constructed as each person interacts and influences another while contributing to a shared vision. She emphasizes that leadership is not based on position but all early childhood professionals who make decisions about educational practice in their work are perceived as leaders in their own right (p.42). She identifies four aspects of leadership that early childhood leaders need to know, understand, and apply in their work: 1) professional knowledge; 2) professional identity; 3) the application of interpretive lenses; and 4) relational trust.

Studies on early childhood leadership have shown that the quality of early years’ service provisions is directly linked to the quality of leadership and management of early years settings (Ang; 2011, Muijs et. al; 2004). It is also evident from research that the quality of preschool settings is almost always characterized by strong leadership, where leaders and practitioners share a clear vision of the setting’s practices (Ang; 2011). In the study ‘Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector’ (ELEYS) in England; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008), present empirical evidence for the importance of early years’ leadership and the role of early years leaders. Their study reveals that effective preschool settings are almost always characterized by strong leadership with relatively minimal staff turnovers, where leaders and practitioners share a clear vision of the setting’s practices, especially in relation to pedagogy and the curriculum (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008, p290). In this comprehensive study (ELEYS) findings showed that effective leadership was the fundamental factor contributing to the quality of early years’ settings, and this in turn had a significant impact on the overall improvement and achievement of the children’s educational outcomes. However, the successful leadership in ECE may depend on the level of empowerment of the teachers and those who work directly with children. In New Zealand for example ECE leaders tend to be teachers themselves and not principal of the school.

2.2 Research gap on Early Childhood leadership

Although there has been an increase in studies on education leadership; research on early childhood leadership is very limited (Muijs et, al; 2004, Stamopoulos; 2012, Nivala, 2002, Ang; 2011, Thornton et al; 2009, Davis; 2009). Reviews of literature on leadership on early years continue to indicate the gap in research in this area. Muijs et al (2004), for example, conducted an international review of literature on effective leadership with specific focus on Early Years leadership. Researchers found that while there was an increase in research on leadership in school sector; research on leadership in the early years was limited and dominated by a relatively small number of researchers. They further found that the literature on leadership in the early childhood field is primarily anecdotal, and in some cases does not transcend the ‘tips for leaders’ style (p.3). They also associated the limited number of studies with a number of issues. For example, they identify certain hesitance to engage with concepts of leadership among professionals in the early years’ settings, who in most cases view themselves first and foremost as educators and child development specialists. They cite for example a study by Bloom (1992) who found that managers in early childhood education indicated that they found contact with children and parents and the achievement of children the most pleasurable parts of their job as leaders and that they had “less enjoyment of their management aspects” (Muijs et al. 2004 p.158). Thornton (2006) describes the lack of awareness to be attributed in part to the fact that the models’ teachers are familiar with promote individual leadership.

Muijs et al. (2004) also found that there was a sense in which much of the leadership in the early years is not well informed by theory and research in the broader field of leadership studies and where it happens, it is limited and does not connect to key concepts in either educational, public sector or business leadership. They further found very limited theorizing which “does not connect to key concepts on leadership in other public sectors” (p.159). For example, they indicate that in the research which they reviewed, literature on EC leadership does not connect with that on school leadership which they associated with sector differences or the complexity of the field of early years education, which is characterized by a greater diversity of organizations and institutions than the school sector. In Tanzania for example early childhood issues fall under the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Vocational Training, the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Community Development Gender, Elderly and Special Groups, as well as the President’s Office Regional Administration and Local government. Each ministry has the segment of roles and responsibilities for children from 0-8 years old. Because of overlaps and different mandates from different ministries, promoting effective leadership in early childhood remains a challenge. Muijs et al. (2004) argue that different settings often have contrasting philosophies and ideals, as well as different structures. (p.159)

From the literature reviewed above and the gaps identified, there is no universal definition of Early Childhood Leadership. It is emphasized throughout for the need of specialized type of leadership. In this study Early Childhood Leadership was operationally defined as the ability of those who are in positions of influencing decisions to do so with relevant knowledge and skills about young children. Early Childhood leadership should be looked at in terms of the roles individuals are performing in creating enabling environment for caregivers, teachers, parents and young children themselves to interact in the environment that is conceptualized around young children development needs. Decisions on Early Childhood Education services are made at different levels, from classroom to school level all the way to the policy level at national level. It is expected that those entrusted with opportunity to serve young children are well trained and supported to make sure that young children are nurtured well to realize their full potentials.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study was conducted in Tanzania at national level, local government authorities (district level) and primary school level in two regions and in each region one district was selected. Through the case study approach, key government documents on education were reviewed to determine the increase or decrease in students’ enrollment in Early Childhood level, teacher training, curriculum development and resource allocations. Interviews were conducted with national level officials, district education officials, primary school head teachers and classroom teachers. The total of 37 participants participated in this study; 9 people at national level, 4 people at the district level and 24 teachers – six head teachers and 18 classroom teachers.

It should be noted here that although primary education is decentralized in Tanzania; the education policy implementation is a top a down process (Telli; 2012) where the central government is responsible for enacting the policies and local government implements policies and directives from central government. The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology (MoEST) takes charge in ‘*quality control and assurance measures, including curriculum review, examination reforms, and teacher management and inspection.1*. Therefore, any attempt to assess the quality of ECE in Tanzania should start at the ministry of education down to local government and schools.

The study therefore explored both pre and in-service professional training opportunities available for education leadership for policy makers, head teachers, pre-primary and grade one teachers. Based on opportunities and barriers identified, the study was intended to seek to propose a long term and sustainable policy and program interventions for the current situation of ECE leadership in Tanzania by balancing the opinions and concerns of different groups of teachers, head teachers and policy makers. It is worth mentioning that implicitly attempts were made to link student performance to educators’ perceptions.

4. Discussion of findings

The findings presented here are summarizing the responses from interviews and other source of data during the study. The two main sources of data were the review of government documents and interviews with study participants. The review of existing government documents in ECE was intended to set the context for the fieldwork, to assess the extent to which ECE was included in government documents and implemented. The document reviewed include the Education and Training Policy 1995, Ministry of Education annual budget 2013/2014, Basic Statistics in Education Tanzania (BEST), Primary Education Development Program (PEDP, 2002) and other key documents.

The findings from the review of government documents revealed that although ECE was part of the formal education system; the enrollment of students in ECE classes was fluctuating indicating a decrease rather than an

¹ http://www.moe.go.tz/policy_issues.html

increase. The findings indicated that ECE was not included in the education annual budgets for the data that were available from 2003/04 to 2012/2014. Also, findings indicated that there was a shortage of trained ECE teachers and that the current ratio of 1:114 was well above the approved teacher student ratio of 1:25.

The second source of data was through interviews with people assigned roles of taking care of Early Childhood Education at national, district and school levels. The findings from interviews confirmed the gaps that were found in the review of government documents in ECE. While the ETP 1995 was being implemented, it was found that the policy did not have a clear plan of implementation and there were many gaps between policy and practice because the policy was not accessible and was not well disseminated. One of the respondent reported that the ETP 1995 was in its eighteenth year of implementation, but it did not have the implementation strategy (plan) since it was developed:

NL4: *The ETP 1995 did not have the implementation strategy, and this is a very big weakness. That is why even its implementation has been problematic. If you give the district education officer, the policy document and ask him or her to implement it you are setting them to fail. What can they do with the policy document without its implementation plan?*

Participants in the interviews also indicated that another challenge related to the education policy was lack of the dissemination mechanism which affected the quality of services desired. It was learnt from the interview that the policy implementation was not guaranteed because the accessibility and dissemination of the policy were noted to be problematic:

NL¹2: *Accessibility in itself is a challenge. A policy as a document, even in the office you would expect to find it; it's not there. If it is there, it is not being read. So, with policy, dissemination is one, reading it is the other and implementation is also another thing. In fact, there are lots of challenges when it comes to policy implementation.*

These responses suggested that there was a lack of emphasis in the use of the ETP 1995 especially at national level where education directives originate. Findings indicate that education activities in Tanzania are implemented through directives and guidelines from the national level and the policy is not known to many people even at the national level.

Limited training opportunities on Early Childhood leadership

This study revealed that people who were in leadership positions did not have the prior ECE leadership training or they had short courses such as seminars and workshops. A few quotes indicates the situation of the policy makers
NL2: *My first training was for two months. This was being provided jointly by UNICEF and UNESCO and the training was about different policies and theories and philosophies on ECE.*

.....
NL7: *I have had quite a few trainings, although they have not taken me to a much higher levels of ECE but which have led me into knowing more about ECE. I mean these trainings have helped to cement the experience I have. I could say my professional background on ECE is based on my experience more than academic trainings.*

NL4: *You know I was trained in management aspects; so far I would like to get training on leadership with focus on ECD leadership. This is something we are lacking especially for people working in ECD [Early Childhood Development].*

The situation was not different at district level and school levels because participants also indicated that either they had not received training or they had attended a few seminars as the following quotes indicate:

HT5 *I don't recall it and it might have been very little to be remembered. But as we work, we attend some seminars on how to care for these young children and their registrations. Basically, there have been some seminar and workshops on managing ECE classes as part of our in-service capacity building.*

HT6: *I don't have any other training apart from the training I got during my pre-service teacher training*

These findings were in line with findings in the literature review where ECE leadership training was viewed as an international problem. Findings in the literature review indicated that the field of ECE was dominated by women. This was also true in this study because out of 37 participants in this study only 9 participants were men and 28 participants were women. However, all 9 men were in leadership positions which also confirm with findings from a literature review that indicate leadership positions to be dominated by men.

Participants in the study at all levels indicated that issues of young children were not receiving the attention required. Participants at national level indicated that the major problem was the lack of a policy implementation plan and therefore the policy implementation was not monitored. The limited understanding of the importance of ECE by the decision makers was also discussed by all participants at the national level to be a factor affecting priority setting, resource allocation and program implementations. The same situation was repeated at district and primary school levels where it was noted that there was no communication system in place to help information flow from top to bottom and vice versa.

Limited leadership training specific to ECE was also identified as a missing link to the people entrusted to

¹ NL= National Leader –participants at national level were referred to as NL1 or NL2 etc

implement ECE at all levels. The responses from all participants presented a different picture of skills and training, but which can be summarized as inadequate training on ECE. Almost all participants at the national level had some leadership training either through on-job training or formal leadership courses, but most of those trainings were general. Other opportunities included national and international travels to conferences which were also mentioned as avenues for knowledge gain. However, almost all participants at the national level indicated that they had no prior training in ECE before they were assigned the ECE leadership roles in their ministries. They mentioned seminar and workshops and actual practice in ECE activities as the ways through which they had gained their expertise in ECE. The situation was not very much different at district level and primary school levels. In fact, all participants at these levels indicated that they had no formal leadership training in ECE.

5. Conclusion

Early Childhood is a period that is very important in the growth and development of each human being. Children who are born from poor families and poor communities are vulnerable of difficult circumstances they find themselves in. Often failure of appropriate care is associated with family failure. On contrary, government institutions that have key roles of ensuring the quality of life of all young children do not equally fulfill their responsibilities. The public policies are developed to guide the government operations, but the implementations of those policies require skilled individuals at all levels. Early Childhood as a foundation period for future development is demanding specialized leadership training opportunities, so that those in decision making positions do not only view ECE as an option but a sector that should be well addressed. Training opportunities, budget allocations and policy implementations are all important, but they all depend on well informed and well positioned individuals in leadership positions at all levels. To tap into the government initiatives to improve quality basic education in Tanzania and other developing countries; investing in Early Childhood leadership at all levels of education implementation is among the sustainable strategies of ensuring that all children have equal opportunities for quality good start in their basic education. In Tanzania as it is in many other developing countries, Early Childhood Education is now recognized as the entry level in the basic education. It is the missed opportunity if governments and other stakeholders will not deliberately develop Early Childhood leadership programs to equip leaders and those in the interpretation of policies, curriculum, and other relevant programs with leadership skills. Building leadership capacities of those who work with young children should be viewed as creating linkages in coordinated programming to multiplicity of actors in the field of young children at all levels from the family to the policy development and interpretations to for quality good start in basic education. There are a lot of interest in improving the quality of Early Childhood Education and this paper recommends that decision makers should be trained, supported, and challenged to understand the sector they are committed to improve to sustain families, quality of services and human development.

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