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# Perceptions on Curriculum Implementation: A Case for Rural Zimbabwean Early Childhood Development Teachers as Agents of Change

Fortunate Madondo 

Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

## ABSTRACT

This article examined perceptions on curriculum implementation regarding rural Zimbabwean early childhood development (ECD) teachers in 2017. The study aimed to locate teachers as agents of change in schools by reviewing their perceptions in implementing the recently introduced ECD framework. In this qualitative multiple case study, 30 rural teachers from Zimbabwe's 10 provinces shared their views as well as strengths and weaknesses of the competence-based curriculum. Implicit in the teachers' descriptions of effective curriculum implementation were their perspectives on effective classroom instruction. Such perspectives offer much insight into challenges experienced in curriculum implementation for rural schools. Using teacher agency as a theoretical framework, findings of the study revealed that teachers lack support regarding proper infrastructural facilities, and schools lack human, financial, and material resources for successful curriculum implementation. The researcher recommends that as a basis for future policy, the concerns of teachers, parents, and learners in complex ECD settings need to be highly prioritized by the curriculum makers ahead of planning and implementing a new curriculum.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Competency-based curriculum; curriculum implementation; early childhood development; early childhood education and care; teacher agency

Tension is widespread globally concerning early childhood education (ECD) policy between governments that aim at decreasing teachers' opportunities to exercise autonomy in their own work and those that aim to safeguard and promote it (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). Some regard ECD teachers as mere childcarers, whereas others strongly argue that they are most important in preparing children for future academic excellence and for providing children with opportunities to reach their full potential. It can be deduced that some governments may not prioritize funding of early childhood education (ECE). This lack of funding further exposes some teachers to deplorable working conditions, particularly in poor rural communities. Article 24 of the African Charter of 1986 decrees that all humans shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favorable to their development (African Charter, 1986). This is quite significant to teachers and children at the ECD level, who should enjoy the right to conducive teaching and learning environments designed to enhance learners' early stimulation for optimal development. The researcher makes a case that such a right should be recognized at all levels, be it at the planning stage or the implementation stage of a curriculum.

Within the field of child development, literature pointing to the importance of early childhood as a conceptual category and as a social position for the study of a previously overlooked or marginalized group, that is, children, is certainly dominant (Kehily, 2008). For Zimbabwe, urban ECD settings dominate discussions of domestic ECD programs, further marginalizing a group of children, such as rural ECD learners who have very different learning experiences. Much still needs to be done by the government and civil society to improve the current status of ECD programs, particularly in

poor rural schools (Bukaliya & Mubika, 2012; Samkange, 2016). To date, there are about 6,071 registered ECD schools in Zimbabwe (National statistics profile, 2017).

The author proposes an alternative way of perceiving rural ECD centers with regard to curriculum implementation, one that considers rural teachers' context and the problems they share with their urban counterparts. The case study design used in the current study illustrated the complexities of ECD curriculum implementation in rural Zimbabwe. Information drawn from the study is based on interviews and focus group discussions conducted with teachers from January to October of 2017. The study focused on rural ECD teachers' beliefs to understand the individual and collective discourses that inform teachers' perceptions, judgments, and decision-making and that motivate and drive teachers' agentic actions for the overall effectiveness of curriculum implementation. The researcher achieved this by asking the following research question in particular: What are the barriers that hinder effective implementation of the new curriculum in rural Zimbabwean schools?

The immediate occasion for the study was to suggest ways to advance effective curriculum implementation, with particular interest in qualified rural ECD teachers' agentic best practices. The existing literature has not focused on how rural ECD teachers, particularly in the Zimbabwean context, contribute to effective curriculum implementation. This study, therefore, addresses this gap. The main intent is to explore the teachers' perceptions on the implementation of Zimbabwe's new curriculum, a framework that is aimed at treasuring children's cultural identity and values while preparing them for life and work through the acquisition of practical competencies, literacy, and numeracy skills. Implicit in the qualified rural ECD teachers' descriptions of effective curriculum implementation are their perspectives on barriers that hinder effective classroom instruction. The perspectives offer much insight into the challenges experienced in curriculum implementation particularly for rural ECD settings, raising an important argument about what constitutes effective curriculum implementation at the ECD level that needs to be considered amid calls by the government for urgent curriculum implementation that is deeply embedded in classroom instruction.

The study adopted teacher agency as the theoretical framework. As observed by the researcher, this model also can be applied to ECD curriculum implementation by teachers operating in rural contexts where unequal distribution of resources is geographically based, as in the Zimbabwean case. The teacher agency model of curriculum implementation could certainly be used as an explanatory tool for rural teachers because the contexts in which they operate from represent areas where resources are scarce as compared to the urban school settings that boast ECD centers with high-quality standards and a greater availability of resources.

## **Theoretical framework: Understanding teacher agency**

Until recently, issues around teacher agency have gained momentum in teacher education programs. The term *agency* has been interpreted in different academic spheres, including anthropology, economics, philosophy, and sociology (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012). Agency is simply defined as the capacity of actors to carefully suggest ways to effectively counteract challenges faced in particular situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). This definition views agency in the form of action wherein actors engage in analytical thinking in response to challenges. Archer (2000) views agency as related to autonomy and causal efficacy. Here, the agency is conceptualized as having the ability to produce desired or intended outcomes independently. In addition, the agency is viewed in terms of how an individual is able to identify goals toward which they focus their actions and assess the extent to which the expected goals have been achieved (Edwards, 2005). Thus, the agency involves being reflective about one's intended actions and being able to evaluate one's successes. The definitions above can be translated in the sense that the agentic individual is agentic simply as a result of their personal capabilities, even in instances where that agency is hardly put into practice (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). However, these definitions are potentially problematic in the sense that they present agency as an individualized action depending on their various capabilities.

The term agency can be defined as an *emergent phenomenon* (Priestley et al., 2015). This refers to individual achievements resulting from interactions of individual competencies and the resources, affordances, and environmental limitations through which individuals operate. This ecological conceptualization of agency takes into consideration an individual's capabilities through the availability of resources and the context in which an individual operates from. Thus, the agency is applicable in the current study where teachers relied on the availability of resources in their quest to effectively conduct classroom instruction. Within the context of Zimbabwe's ECD teachers, teacher agency is fundamental in revealing the critical role that teachers should play in curriculum implementation. It could be concluded that agency relates to teachers not only being able to teach what they know but also being able to teach *beyond* what they know in ways that push the field in new directions that will actually move and reinvent current practice.

Moreover, the ecological approach propounded by Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005) explains how the innate tendencies inherent in children and the environment work in tandem to effect change in growth and development. The ecological approach is relational because individuals are defined by their social and material environments, and temporal because the agency is characterized by experiences of the past, with an orientation to the future and traced into the present (Priestley et al., 2015). To put this into perspective, teachers do not operate in isolation from learners and/or parents, but rather succeed through interactions and collaborations with others, and the environment plays a significant role in shaping their past, present, and future practice. The current study resonated well with the teacher agency model, which emphasizes that collaborations among teachers and parents are necessary for improving classroom instruction at the ECD level. Some scholars observe the benefits of parental involvement in their children's learning through working with teachers (Enz & Foley, 2009; Enz & Stamm, 2015). Considering their role as the children's first teachers, parents are important players in the networks of ECD teachers.

Inherent in the calls for agency is the need to put in place social and material mechanisms that enable educators from various work backgrounds to function and engage with others. Priestley et al. (2015) make a case that agency denotes a "quality" of the *engagement* of actors with temporal relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves. This view of agency helps us to conceptualize how humans are potentially reflexive and innovative, resilient to limitations of societies, and understand how individuals are supported and controlled by the social and material environments in which they operate (Priestley et al., 2015). This demonstrates that in the model, the agency does not refer to what people possess (e.g., property, capacity, or skills) but rather agency refers to the actions done by people collectively. However, in the case of Zimbabwean rural ECD teachers, their agency can be greatly affected by social contexts and material environments during curriculum implementation. The next section discusses factors that hinder curriculum implementation and suggests ways to address them.

## **Factors hindering curriculum implementation and ways to mitigate them**

According to Egan (2003) curriculum refers to the study of any and all educational phenomena that may draw on any external discipline for methodological help and does not allow the methodology to determine inquiry. Of necessity, curriculum should aim at producing knowledge that may have educational value to the beneficiaries. Curriculum can be defined as a set of material resources that teachers use to implement a curriculum. Globally, research is replete with evidence of various factors affecting curriculum implementation. For instance, time allocated to the learning areas and covering the syllabus is common concerns for teachers. Some U.S. teachers insist that the curriculum confines them to teaching very specific content and that they have to double up students' study time to cater to all learners' unique learning capabilities (Grant, 2009; Kennedy, 2005). The implication of such decisions is that some sections of the curriculum are at risk of not being covered as teachers prioritize the teaching of specific content to cater to learners' individual learning differences. In an attempt to address challenges associated with time and content coverage, Chinese primary school

teachers have opted to use the teacher-centered approach for classroom instruction to cover the curriculum content (Wang & Zhao, 2011). A teacher-centered approach to classroom instruction has its own strengths and weaknesses. The strength is that teachers are comfortable and confident in classroom activities. The disadvantage is that the method does not cater to learners' different learning preferences. Arthur (2017) argues that schools need to change structures, culture, and programs of curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of diverse students. Moreover, Bennie and Newstead (1999) recommend the integration of subjects during classroom instruction as a way to address challenges linked to time and content coverage.

In addition, lack of teaching resources might contribute to teachers' negative reception of a new curriculum. Some schools are heavily under-resourced, particularly in the poor rural communities. Zimbabwe is divided into 10 provinces, 88 districts, and 1,958 wards in its administrative divisions (National statistics profile, 2017). Resources and/or service provision for schools are provided largely using these structures. Seventy-two education districts are in charge of monitoring schools in the 10 provinces. The urban schools usually benefit more than their rural counterparts in terms of resource allocation. Wang and Zhao (2011) identify a series of resource-related problems in rural areas, including serious shortage of funds, continuing weakness of school teacher resources, and an absence of technological resources for instructional purposes.

Research has substantiated that technology through the use of computers can help children learn in different curriculum areas and develop higher-order thinking skills (Clements, 2002). Moreover, computers enable users to understand a combination of visual displays, animated graphics, and speech; save and retrieve documents; explore situations; and work as individuals (Clements, 2002). Thus, the availability and use of information and computer technology aid children's cognitive development through a wide range of activities.

Various solutions have been identified to address the challenges related to lack of resources. For instance, Arthur (2017) suggests that more resources from a variety of sources must be invested, for example, refurbishing satellite schools so that teachers can effectively implement the curriculum at ECD level. In addition, where teachers lack computer skills and knowledge, professional development or training in this area is recommended as a way to mitigate this challenge. However, it can be concluded that effective professional development programs should be aimed at professional growth and not at evaluation purposes. The researcher argues that problems related to lack of resources might be addressed by venturing into income-generating projects by schools, rather than depending on donor or government subsidies.

The lack of effective professional development and qualified teachers to teach at the ECD level exacerbates the teachers' resistance to curriculum change, which is a hindrance to curriculum implementation. In rural Zimbabwe, a total of 5,698 teachers are trained to teach ECD, whereas 5,737 do not have such training (National statistics profile, 2017). The recommended teacher-pupil ratio at the ECD level in Zimbabwe is 1:20 (Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005). However, according to the National statistics profile (2017), the general teacher-pupil ratio for trained teachers in rural Zimbabwe is 1:79, well above the stipulated normal ratio. The high teacher-pupil ratios, coupled with untrained teachers, make curriculum implementation all the more difficult in Zimbabwe. To alleviate this challenge, more ECD teachers need to be trained in colleges and deployed to the country's rural schools, where much of the shortage of qualified teachers is experienced.

Various factors heighten barriers to curriculum implementation, including the social structure of schools, material and human resources, skills development and motivation of learners, and provision of support by school administrators regarding curriculum change and innovation (Yan, 2014). To address the challenges associated with lack of expertise, Arthur (2017) suggests that the government should invest in technology use training so that teachers can better prepare learners to use technology, especially in the context of new assessments. Meanwhile, Aydin, Ozfidan, and Carothers (2017) encourage reform from within; that is, schools need to consider having more in-service training of teachers.

In addition, the timing and purpose of curriculum reform might hinder effective curriculum implementation (Yan, 2014). In an article aimed at exploring lessons that can be drawn from the previous Health and Physical Education (HPE) reform efforts in the Australian curriculum, Lynch

(2014) argues that there is no need for changing the curriculum unless it is done for overall political control of the framework and fulfillment of one's political aspirations. Lynch (2014) identifies various similarities between the recommended changes and some already existing, localized frameworks in Australia. It can be argued that some politicians advocate for curriculum change to push their political agendas and remain in power, rather than addressing pertinent issues arising from curriculum change. To address the challenge of timing and purpose of curriculum reform, a case can be made that there is a need to introduce curriculum implementation as a gradual process as opposed to rapid implementation. Teachers can be forced to implement changes, but if they are not given the opportunity to reflect on the innovation and their experiences, they might not be convinced of its value (Bennie & Newstead, 1999).

In addition, lack of proper curriculum planning might yield adverse effects over the effective implementation of a curriculum. Van Woerkum, Aarts, and Van Herzele (2011) developed a model that curriculum makers and implementers can use as an analytical tool, usable in educational curricula as well as in the practice of planning. Three assumptions make up their model: (1) change can be planned or/and unplanned; (2) in both planned and unplanned change processes, different societal actors are involved; and (3) change is the product of events, new language, and practices. It can be inferred that several challenges associated with planning result from planned change, which must be undertaken in the midst of unplanned change as the two aspects are interwoven. Planning is situated in a multi-actor network, where one party may have a co-ordinating function to integrate the existing interests, but this party is not in charge of curriculum implementation, no matter how well-developed ideas are (Hoch, 2007). One way of addressing the problem of the lack of proper curriculum planning is by involving all the relevant stakeholders in the planning process/phase. From the above, it can be deduced that it is necessary to consider the active participation of such actors as heads of schools, teachers, parents, and learners to achieve effective curriculum planning and implementation. Recruitment of a more diverse teaching forces in the planning phase can field positive results, as representation of teachers will be equal (Bennie & Newstead, 1999).

Van Woerkum et al. (2011) define planning-in-process as the active participation by a variety of actors in a society to achieve their set goals. The following terms have been used to replace the term planning: contingency planning (Andersen, 2003), evolutionary planning (Burnes, 2005), and participatory planning (Forester, 2001). Planning is placed in the broader context through which change is viewed as a process for everyone in different contexts, where humans experience significant changes in their livelihood (Van Woerkum et al., 2011). This means that planned change should be designed in such a way that it involves active participation of all concerned stakeholders to achieve successful curriculum implementation.

The foregoing discussion shows some of the factors that are likely to hinder effective curriculum implementation. Several strategies to mitigate the challenges have been explored. Most of the foregoing findings are Eurocentric in nature. They seem to lack Third World countries' contextual realities regarding the teachers' agentic role in curriculum implementation, especially in the rural settings. Most studies are more than 5-years old; hence, they appear to be outdated. On the basis of these gaps, the researcher was prompted to conduct the current study to explore the Zimbabwean early childhood development teachers' agentic role in curriculum implementation.

## **Childhood education and the new curriculum in Zimbabwe**

Worldwide, there is a tendency of acknowledging early childhood as a hot issue in academia; thus, various studies have been conducted on child development. Among them, several approaches have emerged as accepted, dominant theories of child development. Some of them explain the biological, physical, psychological, and socio-emotional process of child development, whereas others explain how and why the process continues once it has begun. However, some of the models emphasize findings based on developmental changes and growth that occur among children who are, for certain reasons, observed in developed countries where contexts differ extensively from those of developing countries, particularly the

rural Zimbabwean context. As such, an increase in the training of ECD teachers and the integration of ECE into the primary education mainstream have been great achievements for the government of Zimbabwe since the attainment of independence in 1980 (Gunhu, Mugweni, & Dhlomo, 2011; Samkange, 2016). Various studies have confirmed that integrating ECE in the mainstream is aimed at achieving overall child development, school readiness, and detection of problems for early intervention, prevention of later problems, and the promotion of healthy development (Rusman, 2015).

In addition, integrating ECE in the mainstream has various benefits. For instance, results from a study titled *Assessing the Benefits and Challenges of the Introduction of Early Childhood Development Education to the Infant Grade in the Zimbabwe Education System* by Bukaliya and Mubika (2012) suggest that teachers feel relieved about teaching the pupils who have gone through the ECD program because they have already been exposed to classroom instruction and are motivated to learn and do their school work more effectively. However, dating back to 2005, several limitations of the previous ECD curriculum opened windows for a review of the framework. For instance, the old curriculum has been highly criticized for being too academic and for limiting learners from advancing industrial and mechanical interests from an early stage. Thus, the reviewed ECD curriculum promotes industrial and mechanical skills, inclusivity, lifelong learning, equity and fairness, and gender sensitivity. The framework was presented to the Zimbabwe's Cabinet and approved on 22 September 2016 (Pindula, 2018). It entered its first phase of implementation in January 2017.

Notwithstanding that the new curriculum is beneficial to learners, a gap has been created whereby some rural teachers lack sufficient resources to spearhead successful implementation of the framework. Ornstein and Hunkins (2009) make a case that effective curriculum implementation emanates from careful planning with a focus on three key elements: humans, programs, and process. The researcher notes that certain schools have failed to implement the curriculum as a result of negligence directed toward teachers. Rather than placing emphasis on teachers, some schools have relied more on program modification or on the process. Curriculum implementation is a process in itself through which teachers are expected to plan, implement, and evaluate (Rusman, 2015). As such, amid calls by the government to urgently implement the new curriculum stands the rural ECD qualified teacher who is expected to conduct classroom instruction and scaffold learners in their learning (Goodwin, Roegman, & Reagan, 2016). Given the important role that teachers as agents of change play to ensure that learners at the ECD level reach their full potential in every sphere of life and prepare them for future adulthood, it becomes necessary to know how they define effective curriculum implementation. It is through their meaningful interactions with learners that they enact their understandings of effective classroom instruction.

In Zimbabwe, particularly in rural districts, some teachers operate in under-resourced schools that are characterized by lack of infrastructure, unavailability of material resources, and high teacher-pupil ratios; hence, their role in curriculum implementation is especially impactful. The researcher believed that teachers spend almost every day of the school year interacting with learners and collaborating with local communities; as a result, their perspectives, practices, and roles mediate successful implementation of the curriculum. Therefore, the current study sought to address issues to do with curriculum implementation at the ECD level, thereby advancing theory related to childhood education. The study achieved this by identifying the best agentic practices that rural teachers can employ to achieve effective curriculum implementation at the ECD level amid challenges they face in their geographical areas of operation.

## Method

To understand the phenomenon, the researcher adopted a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis, particularly the case study design. In achieving this, permission to collect data in the participating schools was sought and granted from the responsible authorities (i.e., Provincial Education Directors, District Education Inspectors, and Heads of Schools, respectively, within the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe). Upon obtaining permission at the



school level, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to teachers before each participant signed a consent form to voluntarily participate. The researcher assured participants that pseudonyms were to be used to protect their identities and maintain their confidentiality. It was necessary to note that the interview questions and focus group discussions were formulated based on the study's research questions.

Systematic random sampling was employed to select 10 rural primary schools from the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe, namely, Harare, Bulawayo, Manicaland, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Masvingo, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, and Midlands. Subsequently, purposive sampling was used to select three ECD qualified teachers from each of the participating schools, with the aim of exploring teachers' perceptions on implementing the new curriculum. In total, 30 ECD qualified teachers from Zimbabwe's 10 provinces participated in the study. The teachers' biographical data are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Ten face-to-face interviews targeted individual-qualified ECD teachers, with each session lasting between 10 and 15 min. The 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) comprised a group of three teachers from each province and the sessions lasted between 20 and 30 min. Both interviews and FGDs generated thick descriptions that were then corroborated with document reviews of memos, thereby underlining the fact that qualitative studies use multi-methods to generate data (Urquhart, 2013).

Qualitative analysis was done by means of thematic analysis through assigning themes to the data. Therefore, the FGDs and interviews were subjected to several rounds of reading through the data and writing analytic memos before open coding to identify conceptual themes in relation to the research questions. The FGDs were coded FGD1 (Harare), FGD2 (Bulawayo), FGD3 (Midlands), FGD4 (Manicaland), FGD5 (Mashonaland East), FGD6 (Mashonaland West), FGD7 (Mashonaland Central), FGD8 (Masvingo), FGD9 (Matabeleland North), and FGD10 (Matabeleland South). The researcher iteratively looked across data sources for triangulation purposes and this enabled themes and categories to emerge naturally. The researcher stopped coding and analysis when codes, categories, and memos reached saturation – a point in data analysis where no new data emerge after a series of additional data collection efforts has been conducted (Urquhart, 2013). Preliminary findings were then examined using the conceptual frameworks provided by Urquhart (2013) to contextualize teacher perspectives of effective curriculum implementation and classroom instruction.

**Table 1.** Research characteristics of the participants (N = 30).

Variable	Frequency	Frequency percentage %
Sex		
Male	3	10%
Female	27	90%
Total	30	100%
Age in years		
Below 30	2	6.7%
31–39	26	86.7%
40–49	2	6.7%
50+	0	0%
Total	30	100%
Teaching experience at ECD level in years		
Below 10	27	90%
11–20	3	10%
21+	0	0%
Total	30	100%
Grade taught		
ECD A	9	30%
ECD B	13	43%
Grade 1	3	10%
Grade 2	5	16.6%
Total	30	100%

## Research findings

Findings suggest that three major challenges hinder the effective implementation of the new curriculum by ECD qualified teachers operating in rural primary schools of Zimbabwe. These were hurried implementation of the curriculum, teachers' failure to implement the new curriculum, and lack of resources to support the curriculum.

### *Hurried implementation of the curriculum*

The first theme to emerge from the findings suggests that the new curriculum was hurriedly implemented. Most teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the way the implementation process was handled. For instance, the participants indicated that they were not adequately prepared prior to the implementation of the framework. These views are well articulated in the following interview transcript by one of the teachers from Matabeleland South province.

I think the new curriculum was supposed to be implemented as a long-term not "there and there like the poison used to kill rats"/"*khonapho khonapho njengo muthi wama gundwane*" because it needs a lot of changes in facilities, for instance, infrastructure, teacher development programs, adjustments in order to suit our poverty-stricken rural societies. The curriculum makers need to take it bit by bit; according to my assessment, they want to compete with developed countries yet they have no resources to match the competition. They copied China or Japan, which are already well established where children are trained vocational skills and not academically. (Teacher Vio from Matabeleland South province)

All the nine teachers from three provinces of Bulawayo, Midlands, and Matabeleland North agree that "the curriculum was introduced abruptly and children, teachers and parents were not given enough time to prepare for the change." The following are the actual words of participants from the 10 provinces:

- (1) The new curriculum was introduced expeditiously to please certain sections of the society. (Teacher Banga, Manicaland province)
- (2) The current curriculum was introduced in a flash, maybe for political reasons, at the expense of professional reasons. Policymakers forgot that ECD curriculum was relatively new, and it was facing further new changes before its maturity. (Teacher Smart, Masvingo province)
- (3) The then responsible Minister of Primary and Secondary Education was somehow trying to please his/her master by rushing to introduce and implement the new curriculum without first making sure that the necessary resources and monitoring mechanisms were in place. (Teacher Fork, Bulawayo province)
- (4) I was not only surprised but extremely shocked by the fast-track introduction of the new curriculum (inclusive of the ECD curriculum), which did not consider the availability of requisite resources such as human, material, financial, technological, time, and physical inputs. (Teacher Swipe, Mashonaland East)
- (5) According to my line of thought, the then Minister of Primary and Secondary Education forgot that hurried food does not always taste good when he/she hurriedly introduced the new curriculum, let alone the newness of the ECD curriculum. (Teacher Biggie, Mashonaland Central)
- (6) The new curriculum was introduced too soon ... teacher quality to attend to ECD curriculum needs was glaringly absent. (Teacher Sly, Mashonaland West)
- (7) Although I view the new curriculum as relevant, it was quickly implemented without taking cognizance of the resource quality available. (Teacher Sharp, Midlands)
- (8) Although the new curriculum was fantastic, the greatest worry, in my own opinion, was its fast implementation. (Teacher Make, Matabeleland North)
- (9) Notwithstanding the fact that the new curriculum is responsive to the needs of the Zimbabweans, its quick implementation has been its greatest letdown. (Teacher Bike, Matabeleland South)
- (10) Overexcitement on the part of the Ministry of Education ruined the effective implementation of the new curriculum. (Teacher Fix-it, Harare Province)

The foregoing evidence suggests that although teachers appreciate the introduction of the framework, all of them concur that the need to involve them directly as important stakeholders in the ECD programs prior to curriculum implementation is not only necessary but also crucial (see Memo C). Fast implementation and lack of resources were cause for concern. The preceding participants indicated that during the planning phase, curriculum makers need to visit all rural schools in Zimbabwe to establish their lived experiences and challenges (see Memo C). These views are well articulated in the following memo:

Based on the individual interviews and focus group discussions conducted with teachers, it emerged that all of them concur that they realised the benefits of the curriculum to the learners. However, they all expressed feelings of disgruntlement in that they were not actively involved in the planning phase of the curriculum but just found themselves being tasked to implement the curriculum. They suggest that in future the curriculum planners should involve them in every step and the planners should arrange some visits to all the poor rural schools of Zimbabwe and experience the teachers' everyday experiences because it seems they were not aware of the difficult circumstances that rural teachers operate in. (Memo C)

In concurrence with the view that the curriculum was hurriedly implemented before proper measures for its full implementation were put in place, all the 12 teachers from four Provinces (namely, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, and Harare) place the blame on the Ministry for rushing to implement the curriculum before confirming results from the pilot study. Even though some teachers acknowledged that several consultative workshops were held nationwide, others felt that they had not gained much from the workshops. For instance, the teachers insisted that the workshop facilitators lacked comprehensive knowledge of the ECD curriculum and hence failed to respond to some important and pertinent questions raised by the ECD teachers. The participants indicated that there was a need to wait for results from the new curriculum pilot study before calling for all schools to implement the national framework. This data was obtained from interview sessions conducted with ECD teachers where several questions were asked (see [Appendix A](#)). From the focus group discussions, the participants were quoted as saying:

The Ministry was to be blamed because it rushed to implement the new curriculum before evaluating the success of the pilot study at the selected schools. The workshops were fast tracked in some parts of the country, leaving the receiver (ECD teacher) with an empty mind as well as going back empty handed. This was due to the fact that some of the facilitators were not acquainted with ECD (e.g., school inspectors). When teachers from our four provinces attended one of the workshops, they were asking us to present and give examples of what we were taught at college and they had nothing new to share with us from the curriculum. At one school where some of our colleagues teach, the school was chosen as one of the pilot schools for testing the curriculum and they are saying they have not seen any success of the framework. This school was not given any resources by the government as support for the pilot and no one came to enquire and evaluate the results of the pilot study after they started implementing the curriculum. (Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, and Harare province teachers)

The researcher noted that the qualified teachers agree that the implementation was not gradually introduced. This affected their practice in the classrooms, be it in planning for the activities or classroom instruction. The following memo based on analysis from the focus group discussions attest to this:

Some teachers argued that instead of adding all the learning areas at the same time, these could have been introduced in phases, gradually. As such, participants insisted that consideration of the level of the learners needed to be prioritised in selecting and introducing the newly introduced learning areas. This includes how well the young learners can cope with the content presented to them or how the prolonged hours of learning affect their academic performance. (Memo E)

The following memo written by the researcher examined participants' responses regarding the rushed implementation of the new curriculum:

It is saddening to note that the Ministry recommended that the new curriculum should be implemented before realising the success of the curriculum from the pilot study. The pilot schools were not allocated any resources by the government to support the implementation and no feedback on the success or failure of the pilot study were given to some of the schools that participated in the pilot study. The facilitators of workshops did not have enough knowledge of ECD, which means that teachers benefitted nothing from these workshops. In my own

view, the responsible authorities needed to make use of facilitators that were part of the curriculum reform and that were well informed about current trends on ECD as they would be able to attend to various matters arising from the teachers and enlighten the teachers about their role and expectations in the new curriculum. The use of less informed facilitators was actually a waste of time and resources exercised on the part of the Ministry and teachers who could have been in the class teaching. (Memo B)

In support of the aforementioned interview data, the researcher conducted focus group discussions with teacher (see [Appendix B](#)) and the focus group discussion (FGD) data include these reports:

- (1) To me, the new curriculum implantation (1) was rushed to the point that it seemed to ignore issues of quality. (FGD1, Teacher Best, Harare province)
- (2) The way I see the implementation of the new curriculum is that it was handed down to the schools using the Elite/Mass Model of policymaking, which characterizes itself with fast implementation of policies, programs, projects, and plans without exhausting options. (FGD2, Teacher Pleasant, Bulawayo province)
- (3) The speedy implementation of the new curriculum was bound to compromise quality, as it prevented teachers from being change agents because they were not involved in the decision-making meant to implement the new curriculum. (FGD3, Teacher Blessed, Midlands province)
- (4) The decision to quickly implement the new curriculum without preparing teachers as agents of implementation was ill-advised. (FGD4, Teacher Skip, Manicaland province)
- (5) On the basis of my experience as a teacher over the years, I have come to learn that hurriedly implemented programs hardly succeed. I foresee the new curriculum falling into this trap as well. (FGD5, Teacher Busy, Mashonaland East province)

The foregoing presentation and analysis of the interview, document review (memos), and FGD data transcripts indicate evidence that the new curriculum was hurriedly implemented with limited support offered to the rural ECD teachers.

### ***Teachers' failure to interpret the curriculum***

The findings suggested that the rural ECD teachers are failing to understand and interpret the curriculum. This is problematic for them in trying to achieve their teacher's role during curriculum implementation. This is not to say that the teachers cannot teach, but the participants insisted that they lack proper guidance in translating and understanding the demands of the new curriculum. The following memo attests to this view:

The teachers had to interpret the curriculum according to their own individual understanding and that posed several problems, such as confusing learners or using inappropriate teaching methods. Achieving teacher agency at a school should involve teachers that are teaching the same grade level to come together and discuss as well as share ideas on how they can plan to teach the content envisaged in the curriculum. Teachers should not work in isolation from others if they are to realise effective curriculum implementation. Interactions with others enhance the achievement of teacher agency since the ecological approach to agency is not based on individual capabilities. Such interactions can also be facilitated through collaborations with teachers from neighbouring schools in similar or different circumstances. (Memo D)

In addition, the following memo concurs that teachers face problems in interpreting the new curriculum content and these impacts negatively on their teaching:

Teachers are expected to implement the curriculum with no knowledge of the curriculum content. In my opinion, it is necessary that before the Ministry gives a go ahead on the implementation of a new curriculum, there must be some system in place countrywide to ensure that all schools have start-up material resource packs of the new curriculum content for easy interpretation of the curriculum. These should include teachers' resource books, children's textbooks and computers. This corroborates with the views obtained from both individual interviews and focus group discussions that in some schools teachers and Heads of schools rely on syllabi as the only available resources for interpreting the curriculum. (Memo A)

The researcher conducted interviews with ECD teachers where several questions were asked to check their perceptions on the implementation of the curriculum (see [Appendix A](#)). One teacher interviewed from Matabeleland North province added that “the new curriculum was really stressing them in that the only reference they had, were the syllabuses which did not have much information” (Teacher Jackie from Matabeleland South province). Another teacher who was interviewed from Matabeleland North province added that “even pupils’ books were not available, we have to rely on the syllabus which we do not clearly understand” (Teacher Tau from Bulawayo province).

The preceding interview data tally well with some of the following data obtained from FGD conducted with ECD teachers (see [Appendix B](#)) with respect to teachers’ failure to implement the new curriculum:

- (1) As teachers, we do not have the capacity to implement the new curriculum, chiefly because we have not been trained to do so. As a result, our role as change agents in the implementation of the new curriculum is incapacitated. (FGD6, Teacher Fun, Mashonaland West province)
- (2) Teachers’ morale is at its lowest ebb because we are facing acute challenges regarding the implementation of the new curriculum. To say the least that we will be able to serve the nation as change agents in curriculum implementation is wishful thinking. (FGD7, Teacher Hit, Mashonaland Central province)
- (3) Resources are scarce to enable us to implement the new curriculum. In that regard, our role as change agents in curriculum implementation increasingly becomes a dream rather than a reality. (FGD8, Teacher Heat, Masvingo province)
- (4) Very few teachers who were selected to be workshopped on curriculum implementation spent 6 weeks doing so, but when they come to schools they rush their experience in two to 3 h. (FGD9, Teacher Nut, Matabeleland North province)
- (5) Time to consult resource teachers is limited because of tight school programs. (FGD10, Teacher Spacio, Matabeleland South province)

What is emerging from memos, interviews, and FGD data is that teachers’ role as change agents in the new curriculum implementation is greatly restricted by lack of capacity and resources.

### ***The lack of resources to support curriculum implementation***

Results from the study suggest that the lack of resources hinders the successful implementation of the curriculum. Overall, the lack of infrastructure, teachers’ resource books, pupils’ textbooks, and computers; non-availability of sport academies to support identified talents in learners as purported by the curriculum; too many educational trips; lack of teaching aids and skilled personnel; lack of motivation; and the problem of composite classes in the rural schools particularly at satellite schools emerged as adverse effects that militate against teachers’ actions in the process of curriculum implementation. These findings were obtained from interviews conducted with rural ECD teachers (see [Appendix A](#)). The following interview transcripts present the views of six participants from various provinces regarding limited or lacking resources:

- (1) The main challenge is that there is a lack of resources across the board, especially in rural schools where we do not have suitable infrastructure for the ECD classes. (Teacher Wen from Bulawayo province)
- (2) Rural schools have no proper infrastructure, making it impossible to teach learning areas like technology. With the new curriculum, we do not have teachers’ resource books for the newly implemented subjects. Books are not available at all and the syllabus lacks teacher input, making it difficult to interpret and implement. (Teacher Tau from Masvingo province)

- (3) The number one challenge is that there are no resources (e.g., textbooks). There are no computers, yet we are expected to teach them in rural areas/kumusha and also there is no electricity/zesa. (Teacher Samaita from Matabeleland South province)
- (4) There is a lack of skilled personnel to implement the newly introduced innovations, such as ICT, as some teachers lack the necessary skills to teach computers. Scarcity of resources is also another challenge. (Teacher Noma from Matabeleland North province)
- (5) We also have a challenge of unavailability of ECD trained personnel, as the government is not recruiting teachers; therefore, some schools are combining the classes (composite classes). For instance, I am having both ECD A and B in one classroom. How will I implement the new curriculum at the same time as preparing the ECD B for grade one concurrently. There is no infrastructure at the Satellite school where I teach, as the two classes are learning under one roof whereas their learning areas are different. (Teacher Alms from Matabeleland North province)
- (6) There are no resources like books, you have to make up your own activities for the pupils. Life is even harder for some of us who operate in satellite schools that have no infrastructure and resources to implement the new curriculum. (Teacher Jack from Bulawayo province)
- (7) It is proving to be difficult to successfully implement this curriculum due to the lack of facilities, such as academies for improving the identified talents in learners. There are no resources such as textbooks and relevant tangible learning media. The new curriculum requires a lot of educational trips, which is a barrier to poor rural schools like ours. (Teacher Vio from Matabeleland South province)
- (8) Another challenge is that there is no salary increment for the past 5 years. Added to that, some schools have hiked the fees to build infrastructure with the aim of meeting the new curriculum demands. This is a burden to cash stripped parents. (Teacher Siya from Matabeleland North province)

It can be deduced from the transcripts that participants considered the environment, resources, and context as important factors that contribute significantly to enhancing curriculum implementation. In addition, participants indicated that their satellite schools have just one classroom and one teacher who teaches multi-grades. One participant insisted that “in the rainy season at times the schools close due to harsh weather conditions not suitable for learning” (Teacher Jack from Bulawayo province). The next section discusses the major research findings.

## **Discussion of the findings**

Findings from the study suggested three major problems affecting the effective implementation of the new curriculum. The first finding is that the new curriculum was hurriedly implemented. The second highlighted that teachers failed to interpret the new curriculum because as agents of change they had not been actively involved in curriculum planning. The third concerned the lack of resources to support the successful implementation of the new curriculum particularly in rural ECD settings. To mitigate these challenges, the article suggests some agentic best practices for implementing the curriculum by rural ECD teachers.

### ***Hurried implementation of the curriculum and the agentic best practices to curriculum implementation***

Results from the participants indicated that prior visits to rural schools during curriculum consultations and planning should be considered as one of the agentic best practices in curriculum implementation. The visits are necessary, as they would provide an insight into the diverse contexts in which the framework is to be implemented. Findings suggested that teachers', learners', and parents' views in curriculum change should be well accounted and catered for. Chaudhary (2015)

argues that the importance of curriculum implementation lies in ensuring that teachers, learners, and parents get involved from the onset so that the curriculum beneficiaries, that is, learners, acquire intended experiences, which include knowledge, skills, ideas, and attitudes for them to fit well into the society. Mitchell (2010) adds that the days are gone when children were positioned as dependants of their guardians. Nowadays, children are expected to play an active role in their societies and should exercise their independency. However, teachers serve as the central agents of successful curriculum implementation, whereas the child is the consumer.

There is need for curriculum makers and implementers to work together in bringing about meaningful curriculum change. Nsamenang (2008) calls upon advocates, researchers, policymakers, teachers, and other ECD stakeholders to uphold and acknowledge the relevance of social construction of childhood in a variety of childhoods found around the globe. It can be inferred from the research findings in this study that the involvement of ECD children as important stakeholders in matters that affect their development when planning and implementing a new curriculum is very necessary. There is a significant difference to which childcare services perceive children as partners in the implementation of programs and the provision of services globally (Alfageme, Cantos, & Martinez, 2003; Cook, Blanchet-Cohen, & Hart, 2004). The introduction of children's participative pedagogy into the school curricula can permit more competent African school children and ECD peers to mentor and "tutor" their conspecifics (Guo & Dalli, 2016; Maynard, 2002). In view of this, it is necessary for curriculum planners to provide children with a wide variety of opportunities to have an input in curriculum planning and implementation. This enables them to acquire meaningful knowledge.

The findings indicated that the implementation of the curriculum should be a gradual process. Yan (2014) argues that because change is a complex phenomenon, policymakers need to work with other relevant stakeholders to ensure successful implementation. Evidence suggests that policymakers need to understand that curriculum change affects various groupings; hence, there is a need to prepare all the relevant stakeholders before a change is employed. Van Woerkum et al. (2011) concur that some individuals may be resistant to curriculum change when it is abruptly imposed on them. In other words, the curriculum might be implemented in phases to give room for curriculum review and improvement.

### ***Teachers' failure to interpret the curriculum and the agentic best practices to curriculum implementation***

Findings in the current study suggest that teachers are failing to interpret the new curriculum as a result of little guidance and support given when it was introduced. It follows from the findings that the agentic best practices for implementing the ECD curriculum should increasingly include in-service training of teachers prior to implementation. Rusman (2015) points out that as teachers interpret and implement the curriculum, measures should be put in place to ensure increased quality of managing and processing goals for improving learning and education. More attention has been paid to various teaching aspects; however, less attention has been directed toward understanding the subjects that teachers teach as individuals (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008). The findings in this study revealed the need for teachers to understand the knowledge of content as they interpret and implement the curriculum. Knowledge of content can serve as one of the agentic best practices for curriculum implementation (Rusman, 2015). The understanding of content is bound to be enhanced with the availability of teaching resources, such as textbooks and teachers' resource books. It can be inferred that rural ECD teachers need to be given opportunities and enough time to study and interpret the content with the help of other practitioners from urban settings as the agentic best practice before implementing the curriculum. Based on the study findings, one can perceive that rural teachers' understanding of effective curriculum interpretation has a bearing on classroom instruction and children's mastery of concepts at the ECD level.

### ***The lack of resources and the agentic best practices for curriculum implementation***

The results in this study show that rural ECD teachers experienced lack of resources to enhance the implementation of the curriculum. Studies indicate that the lack of resources and material support experienced in some schools limits teachers from applying their creative skills in adverse contextual circumstances that are characterized by large class sizes and resistance from students and administration (Johnson, Monk, & Swain, 2000; Nishino, 2008). Policymakers need to consider resource availability as an important factor when planning for inclusive curriculum change to enhance successful curriculum implementation (Eckel, 2003; Guo & Dalli, 2016; Kristen, Kemple, Hartle, & Correa, 2016). It is dangerous to expect teachers to implement the framework with little support to classroom instruction; hence, there is a need to consider focused stakeholder participation. Thus, the researcher argues that the agentic best practices for effective curriculum implementation involve considering teachers, parents, and learners as crucial players in resource mobilization during curriculum planning and implementation.

Findings in this study also suggested that teachers from rural satellite schools faced more serious challenges in terms of lack of infrastructure and other material resources. Croydon, Remington, Kenny, and Pellicano (2016) define a satellite as a small school organized around a reasonably well-resourced central school. In Zimbabwe, satellite schools are characterized by makeshift infrastructures with no proper classroom furniture and equipment. The EMIS report points out that at least 993 satellite schools were recorded in Zimbabwe as of 2014. Despite challenges faced by teachers in satellite schools, in the new curriculum framework, all teachers are expected to ensure that learners develop competencies that include accessing and processing information independently and responsibly, as well as developing broader life skills. Teachers become facilitators of learning in circumstances where resources are hard to come by, such as in the poor rural schools. The researcher argued that in the agentic best practices, there is a dire need to prioritize the allocation of start-up resource kits to satellite schools to ensure successful curriculum implementation. Children at the ECD level need proper infrastructure with age-appropriate facilities to ensure effective learning can take place. Several studies show that young children learn best through play and manipulation of objects (Chikutuma & Mawere, 2013; Heckman, 2000; Stebbing, 1999). However, the lack of resources to use during play and learning experiences can have a negative effect on children's capacity to reach their full potential.

### **Policy recommendations**

In the light of the preceding findings, the researcher recommends:

- Prioritizing, as a basis for future policy, the concerns of teachers, parents, and learners in complex ECD settings, such as poor rural schools, ahead of planning and implementing a new curriculum to ensure successful implementation
- Introducing the concept of teacher agency in teacher education training programs as a pertinent issue for understanding how teachers might enact practice at the same time as engaging policy so as to ensure effective curriculum change and implementation
- Building the capacity of existing general trained primary school teachers who did not train for ECD to provide them with some grounding in ECD philosophy, approaches, and methods so as to increase the number of ECD trained personnel
- Involving teacher training colleges in the curriculum implementation, because they are responsible for training qualified ECD personnel to ensure that teachers are equipped with essential skills for effective curriculum implementation
- Increasing the funding of ECD programs to ensure successful curriculum implementation and address the problems of inadequate infrastructure, lacking equipment, and very few age-appropriate facilities and learning materials, including textbooks, that resonate with the recently introduced curriculum, the play way approach to learning, and the Zimbabwean culture



- Prioritizing ICTs to achieve the goals of the new curriculum, particularly investing extensively in technology use training for both rural and urban teachers so that they can better prepare learners to use technology right from the ECD level
- Ensuring curriculum planners and designers meet the needs of a diverse student body by changing the structures, culture, and programs of curriculum and instruction
- Investing more resources from a variety of sources in constructing and refurbishing satellite schools to enhance curriculum implementation by teachers operating in satellite schools
- Conducting further studies to establish specific contextual factors leading to the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and teacher agency using varied research methods and participants.

In addition, based on the research findings, a model is proposed for the agentic best practices to ensure effective curriculum implementation in rural schools that should include, among others, sampling of under-resourced schools and their teachers in each province during curriculum planning. In the model, rural ECD teachers should fully participate in planning and piloting the implementation and evaluation of the planning process. Other teachers and curriculum planners should take turns visiting the pilot schools during testing of the curriculum. This way, it becomes prudent for other teachers and curriculum planners to be aware of the lived experiences and hardships involved when implementing the curriculum in difficult circumstances, rather than sampling schools that are well resourced. The researcher suggests that the schools in partnership with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education might engage in breakfast roundtables or curriculum workshops with relevant stakeholders, including rural teachers, who should be given opportunities to raise issues and suggestions aimed at improving curriculum implementation at the ECD level. Once thorough implementation and evaluation have been satisfactorily achieved in the pilot schools, only then can other schools gradually begin to implement the curriculum countrywide. Thus, stakeholder involvement and participation of poor and marginalized rural schools should be encouraged to enhance effective curriculum implementation. Rural schools require support in many aspects.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that teachers' barriers to curriculum implementation are inextricably interwoven. Findings revealed that teachers, parents, and learners are not placed at the center with regard to planning and implementing the new curriculum. Teachers are expected to implement the framework without being fully provided with information on the expectations of the new curriculum. One might conclude that teachers are regarded as the foot soldiers and their voices are not considered important in this major milestone of education reform. The Government considers resources like infrastructure, age-appropriate materials and equipment, proper learning materials, finances, and human staff as being less at the ECD level. The only necessary tool needed is the teacher and how he/she operates and wherein terms of infrastructure, and contextual challenges seem less significant. Yet all these factors cumulatively contribute immensely to teachers being able to function and effectively implement the new framework. Therefore, the researcher suggested an agentic best practice model whereby teachers, parents and learners, resources, infrastructure, and the environment in which teachers formulate opportunities for their practice should all be considered by curriculum developers in planning and implementing a new curriculum.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID

Fortunate Madondo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4549-7060>

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## Appendix A. Interview guide for rural ECD teachers

The researcher will explain to the participants that Dr. Fortunate Madondo, the researcher, is a lecturer at Midlands State University in the Department of Educational Foundations, Management and Curriculum Studies and she is conducting a study on the **perceptions on curriculum implementation: A case for rural Zimbabwean early childhood development teachers as agents of change**. Permission has been sought and granted by the offices of the Provincial Education Directors, District Education Officers and Heads of schools from all Provinces to conduct the study at your school. Your responses will be treated with confidentiality and used strictly for academic purposes.

- (1) What do you understand about effective curriculum implementation at the early childhood development level in your rural context?
- (2) To what extent were you involved in the curriculum planning and implementation process as rural based early childhood development teachers?
- (3) How have you and other early childhood development teachers reacted to the introduction and implementation of the new curriculum?
- (4) How do the involvement of rural teachers impact on the implementation of the curriculum?
- (5) How do you as early childhood development teachers structure interactions with learners to ensure effective curriculum implementation?

- (6) To what extent does your school hold workshops with regard to the implementation of the new curriculum?
- (7) How important is it for you to understand and have content knowledge regarding the newly introduced curriculum areas?
- (8) What problems do you encounter in the implementation of the new curriculum at the early childhood development level?
- (9) What strategies can be put in place to mitigate against the problems encountered in implementing the framework?
- (10) How would you improve effective curriculum implementation at early childhood development level?

**THE RESEARCHER THANKS THE PARTICIPANTS!!!**

## **Appendix B. Focus group discussions guide for rural ECD teachers**

The researcher will explain to the participants that Dr Fortunate Madondo the researcher, is a lecturer at Midlands State University in the Department of Educational Foundations, Management and Curriculum Studies and she is conducting a study on the **perceptions on curriculum implementation: A case for rural Zimbabwean early childhood development teachers as agents of change**. Permission has been sought and granted by the offices of the Provincial Education Directors, District Education Officers and Heads of schools from all Provinces to conduct the study at your school. Your responses in the discussions will be treated with confidentiality and used strictly for academic purposes.

- (1) Which early childhood development grade level are you teaching?
- (2) For how long have you been teaching early childhood development classes at this school and how many years have you been in the service?
- (3) Which post of responsibility do you hold at your school and how does the post affect your implementation of the curriculum?
- (4) When did you start implementing the curriculum and was your school involved in the piloting of the framework and evaluation of the curriculum?
- (5) To what extent were teachers, parents, and learners prepared toward the implementation of the new curriculum?
- (6) What resources do you have in place to support implementation of the early childhood development curriculum?
- (7) How much support do you receive from the responsible authorities to ensure effective curriculum implementation?
- (8) What measures are in place to enable you to interpret the new curriculum and how does this impact on your classroom instruction at early childhood development level?
- (9) How do you structure interactions with parents or local communities in the curriculum implementation process and to what extent can parental involvement influence effective curriculum implementation?
- (10) What benefits does the new curriculum have on the early childhood development learners?

**THE RESEARCHER THANKS THE PARTICIPANTS!!!**