

Full Length Research Paper

Effectiveness of early childhood education programme in preparing pre-school children in their social-emotional competencies at the entry to primary one

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The foundation of an individual's optimum or less than optimum development is laid down during the early years of life, particularly during the age between birth and six years. This age covers pre-school education. This study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of Early Childhood Education programme in preparing Pre-school children in their social-emotional competencies at primary one entry. Simple random sampling was used to pick on three provinces: Rift Valley, Central and Eastern and then three districts, Nakuru, Nyeri and Embu. Proportionate sampling was used to select sample schools which were then picked using random numbers. The total number of subjects for the study was 378 (240 pre-school teachers, 120 Pre-school Managers 18 Pre-school Trainers). Questionnaires, focus group discussion and document analysis were used for data collection. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis showed that majority of teachers felt that the Pre-school children were not as prepared in social –emotional skills as they were in academic skills. Analysis of variance results indicate significant variations in the perceptions of the pre-school staff on social-emotional importance ($F=5.078$ $p<0.05$), Social-emotional preparedness ($F=6.175$ $p<0.05$) and academic preparedness ($F=7.250$ $p<0.05$). The pre-school staff unanimously agreed that academic skills were important for pre- school children at primary one entry. It was recommended that readiness instruments for primary one entry should include both academic and social-emotional competencies.

Key words: Social-emotional skills, academic, skills, competencies, preparedness, pre-school, education, early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

It is in pre-schools where most striking changes in behaviours are linked to the child's growing sense of his/her own identity and increasing independence. The child delights in the mastering of new skills and enjoys exploring the world outside his/her home. According to Erickson (1950), it is during this time that the child develops autonomy, learns to choose and decides to accept the consequences of choice. It is in these years of life that one's development can be guided towards the highest potential and determines what one will be, (Hurlock, 1978). Hendrick (1980) reckons that one of the most frequent reasons why families send children to pre-

school is for them to learn to get along well with others and teachers agree with parents that this is indeed a very important kind of competence to acquire. The focus of the teacher therefore must be geared towards helping the children acquire the ability to function successfully as part of a group, restrain their social impulses, obtain what they want in socially acceptable ways and find satisfaction in helping each other as they help their group as a whole. World Bank Report, (October, 1995) established that the Pre-school and Primary School Curricular were deficient in areas pertaining to personality development, situational and stress coping. This was due to a curriculum that is heavy in academic orientation than in Social-emotional skills. Doherty (1997) asserts that understanding a child's transition to school, and the quality of a child's school experience, involves moving beyond a purely academic

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definition of school readiness. He reckons that it is also necessary to consider factors such as motivation and the quality of a child's social and emotional skills.

According to Crnic and Lamberty (1994), school readiness implies that there are expected standards of physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development that children must meet in order to fulfill their school requirements and to assimilate the school curriculum. This is supported by Morrison (1991) who reiterates that readiness must include a child's ability at a given time to accomplish activities and engage in processes associated with schooling whether pre-school, kindergarten or first grade. Readiness is thus the sum of a child's physical, cognitive and social-emotional development at a given time.

A survey carried out on "Child and School Readiness Status Profile" in Kenya, revealed that the most popular indicator for school readiness for children was examination performance and availability of learning and teaching materials, (World Bank Report 1995). Yet in reality, certain dispositions in children need to be nurtured for successful learning to take place. Such dispositions include willingness to engage in tasks and master skills regardless of their appeal, readiness to accept school curriculum, willingness to accept school rules and the authority of teachers, ability to concentrate, ability to complete tasks on time, readiness to monitor ones behaviour, ability to work independently and willingness to accept rules of social behaviour necessary for learning, (Hess and Azuma, 1992). It is, therefore, the view of the researchers that a pre-school program should be able to address all these areas in an integrated way.

Research has established that children who are deprived of human physical touch and opportunities to play, develop brains which are 20-30 percent smaller than normal for their age, (Nash, 1997). Elkind (1973) asserts that play is an important stress valve. It is the nature's way of dealing with stress for children as well as adults. The implication here is that introducing academics too soon makes children feel that school is a bad job since this denies the children what they know best. Elkind goes on to argue that this imposes chronic stress on the children, and the symptoms of burnout begin to appear. The unfortunate result of this leads to children hating school and staying home whenever they could because of minor sicknesses.

A Kenyan psychiatrist, commenting on the importance of play, states that the long hours that the child spends in Pre-school must be for social development. He adds that other purpose is harmful, (Ndetei, daily nation, Sept 18, 2000). The article further asserts that the emphasis that children know how to read and write at a tender age is stressful and denies them opportunity to be children, to play and socialize. Sylva (1980) reckons that play should be work of pre-school child and it is one of the activities most significant to the child's overall development. It is at play or tasks involving co-operation that children in pre-

school begin to learn something of the give-and-take which is necessary in the real life. The importance of play was earlier supported by the work of Piaget (1962) who stipulated how play fits in with overall development and the role that play serves in the development of intelligence. According to Piaget, in play, assimilation will help the child act on the world and change it to fit with his own experiences and understanding. The developmental theory of early childhood education encourages the learners to take full account of and to develop appropriate experiences in the affective domain and not to limit themselves to intellectual development, (Blenkin and Kelly, 1988).

On the other hand, emotions colour our lives. Scholars agree that the cornerstone of both social-emotional development is children's self concept. Rutherford (1988) reiterates that self concept involves the child's internal feelings which result from social interactions that the child is exposed to. It is, therefore, expected that the pre-school program would provide activities in its curriculum that would stimulate the development of social-emotional skills. Erickson (1950) views personality of an individual as the product of his interactions in his social environment. The assumption of this study is that children should be able to communicate their attitudes and feelings as well as being sensitive to the feelings of others. These orientations should take place within the school program where children spend most of their quality time. The pre-school program, therefore, should have not only clearly defined social-emotional activities, but time should equally be provided to implement those activities without a sense of guilt on the part of the teacher.

The principle behind the study is that children are not born with dominance of pleasant or unpleasant emotions, or with dominance of one specific emotion. Instead, the emotions as stated by Hurlock (1978) that will become dominant forces in their lives depend mainly on environment in which they grow up, the relationships they have with significant people, and the guidance they receive in controlling their emotions. This study was designed to find out the effectiveness of early childhood education program in preparing pre-school children in their social-emotional competencies.

Objectives of the study

1. To establish whether teachers perceive pre-school children as well prepared in social-emotional competencies at Primary one entry.
2. To find out whether there are any differences among preschool teachers, managers and trainers on the skills needed by pre-school children at Primary one entry.

To respond to these objectives, one research question and a hypothesis were generated.

Research Question:

Do the teachers perceive Pre-school children as well pre-

pared in social-emotional competencies at Primary one entry?

Hypothesis

Ho₁: There are no significant differences among pre-school teachers, managers and trainers on the skills needed by pre-school children at Primary one entry.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The research was descriptive survey and used *ex-post facto* research design. The design was appropriate for the study since the researchers would not manipulate the independent variable but described it as it were. Early Childhood Education Program was the independent variable and social-emotional competencies constituted the dependent variable in the study.

Population

The study was carried out in three selected provinces in Kenya, Rift Valley, central and Eastern. The targeted population for this study was composed of the pre-school teachers, Pre-school trainers and Pre-school Managers. The rationale was that once the teachers nurture positive perceptions on social-emotional competencies, they would go a long way into consciously integrating them in their planning and teaching. The total number of Pre-schools in the three districts was 1500. Nakuru had 844, Nyeri, 489 and Embu 167, (respective District Education offices, 1997).

Sampling procedure and sample size

Random Sampling method was chosen for this study to select three provinces out of a total number of eight. One district was picked randomly to represent every province. Thus Rift Valley was represented by (Nakuru), Central Province (Nyeri) and Eastern Province (Embu).

Proportionate number of schools was worked out and selected to constitute the sample. The schools were then randomly picked from a list of schools from each district using random numbers. The respondents selected from each district reflected the number of schools in a particular district. The use of random and proportionate sampling ensured that the three provinces were fairly and equally represented in form of selected schools and respondents.

From each of the three districts, the researchers selected 40 Pre-schools giving a total of 120 Pre-schools. According to Sudman (1976), the figure of at least 100 subjects in each major group is an accepted number of cases for survey research. However the distribution per district changed due to proportional sampling which helped to attain equal representation in every district. Thus 68 Pre-schools were picked from Nakuru, 39 from Nyeri and 13 from Embu (Table 1). For the purpose of this study, middle class and top class pre-school teachers were used. Each of the two classes provided a teacher. This gave the researchers a total of 136 pre-school teachers in Nakuru, 78 in Nyeri and 26 in Embu.

All the pre-school trainers were included in the sample since they were few. There was an average of 6 trainers in every district, giving a total of 18. However, Embu district had two more trainers

and this contributed to the final figure of 20 pre-school trainers. The number of pre-school managers, (120) corresponded the number of pre-schools since in every school, there was a manager.

Instrumentation

Data for the study was collected by means of questionnaires developed by the researchers for each category of respondents. Pre-school teachers filled in their age, gender, marital status, the level of education, type of training and their teaching experiences. The second part of the questionnaire sought to find out the level of preparedness of pre-school children as regards social-emotional skills. The respondents were supposed to indicate whether the children were prepared well enough in social emotional skills as they joined primary one. The third part of the questionnaire contained different social-emotional and academic skills, where the respondents were expected to respond to the different levels of importance and preparedness.

Validity

The instruments were validated through a pilot study and a panel of five experts. The researchers conducted the pilot study using a small sample of 52 subjects selected from different schools in Nakuru District. This sample was picked outside the designated main areas of data collection. The sample included pre-school teachers, pre-school managers and pre-school trainers. On the other hand, the panel of experts comprised of the supervisors, experts from the faculty of Education and Human Resources (Egerton University) and the Kenya Institute of Education, Early Childhood Education Department). In the process, the instruments were modified whereby some items were dropped out and others added. The observation schedule was dropped out altogether, since it did not seem to offer important information.

Reliability

The reliability coefficient reflects the extent to which items measure the same characteristics. Coefficient alpha is calculated using the variance of the total test score and the variance of the individual item scores. It represents the average split-half correlation based on all possible divisions of the test into parts. The reliability coefficient was worked out using the Guttman split half reliability and was found to be 0.6878 for social-emotional items and 0.7634 for academic items. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) consider reliability level of 0.7 and above acceptable in establishing the reliability of items.

Administration of research instruments

The researchers delivered the questionnaire to the respective schools. The respondents filled in the questionnaire on site and the researchers collected them after completion. Focus group discussion was carried out by the researchers with selected few pre-school teachers in Nakuru District. The schools selected for focus group discussion were carefully picked not to include the above sampled schools. The information from focus group discussion was used to supplement the information obtained from the questionnaire. Finally the researchers carried out document analysis that included pre-school guidelines for teachers, standard one admission forms and interview forms given to individual pre-school children at the entry to primary one. The various documents were analyzed based on some significant criteria such as content, appropriateness and adequacy of the content. The main aim of document analysis was to establish the sensitivity of teachers and planners about social emotional skills.

Table 1. Proportional Sampling of Pre-schools in Nakuru, Nyeri and Embu.

Pre-school population	Sample fraction	Pre-school sample
844	0.08	68
489	0.08	39
167	0.08	13
1500		120

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data collected from the respondents was analyzed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) for windows 95. Results were presented as frequencies, means, standard deviations and ANOVA. All tests of significance were at $P < 0.05$. The analysis was guided by a research question and a hypothesis.

The researchers established that pre-school children were not as well prepared in social-emotional skills as they were in academic skills, (Table 2). This meant that there was more concern shown for academic competencies than for social-emotional competencies. Based on Likert Scale, it was found out that more cases of teachers fell between 1 - 3 (least prepared) for social-emotional competencies. On the other hand, majority of teachers concentrated between the scores of 4 - 5 (very prepared) and highly prepared for academic skills. On the whole, the teachers' perceptions were higher on the importance and the general level of preparedness for academic competencies than for social-emotional competencies. The bone of contention is that early childhood education programme should be adopting a holistic developmental approach in its theory and practice.

Results from Table 2, clearly indicate that teachers perceive Early-Childhood Education programme to be more effective in preparing children for academic competencies than social-emotional ones. This has made the programme to put much emphasis on cognition than physical, social and emotional development in Kenya and elsewhere.

In reconsidering the children's early development and learning, the technical planning group in America recognized five developmental dimensions that should be considered. These include; Physical well-being and motor development, Social-emotional development, Approach-es towards learning, Language development, Cognition and general knowledge (National Education Goals Panel, 1992)

The analysis made a suggestion that early development and learning must no longer be regarded solely, or primarily as a cognitive issue. Thus the implication of accepting the above dimensions as a part of the whole of early childhood development and learning must manifest in the curriculum content and the goals of early childhood education.

From the results of the focus group discussion, the pre-school teachers expressed the fears that their teaching was more skewed toward academic skills than in social emotional skills. Their concern was that the academic demands set by the pre-school administration and parents did not allow much flexibility in curriculum implementation. The teachers, therefore, found themselves teaching academic skills for better part of their days. They admitted that it was not surprising to find a pre-school teacher with a mathematic set book in a baby class.

On carrying out content analysis, assessment forms, and standard one interview forms, it was found out that not only was there more emphasis on academic readiness, but items on social-emotional readiness were hardly represented in interview forms.

Differences between Perceptions of Pre-school teachers, Managers and Trainers on the skills needed by pre-school children

It was hypothesized that there was no significant difference between the perceptions of pre-school teachers, the trainers and managers on the skills needed by the child at primary one entry. The importance teachers attach to the dimensions relating to social-emotional competencies in their teaching process is significant. In classroom based programme, educators enhance pupil's social-emotional competencies through instruction and structured learning experiences through out the day. Detailed analysis is shown in Table 3.

Analysis of variance results in Table 3 indicated significant variations in the perceptions of the pre-school staff on social-emotional importance ($F=5.078$ $p < 0.05$), Social-emotional preparedness ($F=6.175$ $p < 0.05$) and academic preparedness ($F=7.250$ $p < 0.05$). The pre-school staff unanimously through Focus Group Discussions agreed that academic skills were more important for pre-school children at primary one entry. It is noted that these differences were unwarranted, especially when it is considered the aims and goals of pre-school staff need not conflict at all. It is also worth noting that all the pre-staff perceived academic readiness important. As indicated in the literature review, items related to academic readiness were not found as critical determinants of child readiness as items related to social-emotional competencies (Johnson, 1995).

Table 2. Perceptions of teachers on the level of preparedness of Pre-school children in social-emotional and academic skills.

Skills	N	Mean	S.D.
Social-Emotional Skills			
Sharing with others	380	3.24	1.07
Cooperative play	380	3.39	1.06
Coping with annoying behaviour of others	380	2.40	1.20
Coping with emotional stress	380	2.56	1.27
Ability to deal with aggressive feelings	380	2.72	1.22
Confidence	380	3.43	1.18
Independence	380	3.12	1.22
Knowledge of self	380	3.19	1.20
Ability to communicate	380	3.56	1.13
Academic Skills			
Ability to draw	380	3.21	1.11
Writing numbers and letters	380	3.88	1.02
Recognition of letters	380	3.92	1.03
Performing simple arithmetic	380	3.53	1.10
Recognition of number values	380	3.65	1.17
Reading simple words	380	3.53	1.20
Performing manual tasks	380	3.41	1.19

Table 3. Perceptions of Pre-school Staff on the Importance of Social-emotional and Academic Readiness of Pre-school Children.

ANOVA						
Grouped Competencies		SS	DF	MSS	F	Sig.
Social/emotional importance	Between groups	5.22	2	2.63	5.08	0.007*
	Within groups	19188	371	.717		
Total		197.13	373			
Academic importance	Between groups	7.83	2	3.91	0.08	0.920
	Within groups	173.94	371	.47		
Total		174.02	373			
Social/emotional readiness	Between groups	7.37	2	3.69	6.175	0.002*
	Within groups	221.49	371	.60		
Total		228.86	373			
Academic readiness	Between groups	6.64	2	3.32	7.25	0.001*
	Within groups	169.82	371	.46		
Total		176.46	373			

Conclusion

This study established that pre-school curriculum and teaching are biased toward academic skills hence the dimensions of social-emotional development do not get as much emphasis. The results of the study indicated that pre-school teachers focused more on preparing children academically than in other developmental areas such as social-emotional development. It is, therefore, no wonder that pre-school teachers, managers and trainers perceived

the importance of social-emotional competencies differently and yet they had common goals about child development.

Based on the research findings, it was recommended that early-childhood readiness instruments should be inclusive of all the dimensions of child development, with special emphasis to social-emotional competencies. Paying attention to intellectual competencies only is profoundly inadequate and undermines their potential success.

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