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GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CHILDREN IN HARARE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the quality of guidance and counselling in Harare primary schools to ECD children as perceived by the school heads, ECD teachers and school heads. The study is part of a larger study on assessing the quality of ECD programmes in Harare primary schools in Zimbabwe. A descriptive survey design, qualitative in nature based on three in-depth interview guides for ECD parents, school heads and ECD parents was undertaken with 30 participants from ten primary schools. Data was thematically analysed. The analysis included direct reports of the participants' responses to in-depth interviews. The study revealed different views among school heads, teachers and parents on ECD guidance and counselling in Harare primary schools in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that ECD guidance and counselling was not fully done. It was also highlighted that the ECD teachers and school heads did not have guidance and counselling skills for ECD children. The study concluded that the quality of guidance and counselling to ECD children is compromised. The study recommends that ECD teachers be trained in guidance and counselling of ECD children.

General Terms

Early Childhood Development

Keywords: Guidance, counselling, Early Childhood Development, education, programmes, preschools, caregivers

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Oniye and Durosaro (2009), guidance means the assistance given to someone to make him or her aware of the directions he or she is taking in life. More specifically, guidance in education is the process by which caregivers guide, pilot and direct the behaviour and development of children in their care. Preschool years represent an ideal time for interventions aimed at supporting and guiding socio-emotional development and peer interaction competencies (Bierman & Erath, 2006). The availability of guidance and counselling services assist ECD children to develop social competencies, but maybe lacking due to ECD teachers' lack of guidance and counselling skills. Social competencies are behavioural and social regulations in which social behaviour is displayed in a manner that is responsive to ongoing feedback and stimuli (Okeke & Ani, 2006). The current study sought to establish the level of guidance of social behaviour of ECD children in relation to ongoing feedback.



2. BACKGROUND

Oniye and Durosaro (2009) explain that guidance and counselling is a pre-requisite for quality teaching of ECD children. Guidance and counselling is a social function aimed at guiding desirable growth and behaviour, allowing children to develop peaceful, fruitful and productive behaviour that would not be harmful to them or society. Guidance and counselling is provided by the ECD teacher, acting in loco parentis (Oniye & Durosaro, 2009). Guidance and counselling enhances the quality of ECD programmes as children develop productive behaviours. Inversely, a study by Okeke and Ani (2006) noted that in Nigeria, most preschools and primary schools have no guidance and counselling units. This jeopardises the quality of ECD education and care that could be of help to the ECD children giving them the right physical, psychological and social setting for growth and development (Okeke & Ani, 2006:15; Ogunsanmi, 2011). The current study sought to observe whether Zimbabwean ECD programmes had a counselling services component that helped children develop physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically.

Guidance and counselling offered by ECD teachers should focus on character development, moral education and habit formation (Oniye & Durosaro, 2009). Good and bad habits are learnt and unlearned (Asonibare, 2004) hence the care givers' main aim is to facilitate appropriate behaviour in ECD children because this may influence other children's behaviour (Oniye & Durosaro, 2009). ECD teachers try to ensure that children are guided and counselled to display appropriate behaviour though they may find the task difficult. The study intended to establish whether ECD children got guidance and counselling services from their teachers in Zimbabwe since it is a quality indicator in ECD programmes.

A European longitudinal study by Barnett (2004) on behaviour guidance policies in which teachers supported children in rationalising and talking through their conflicts concluded that there was often no follow-up on children's misbehaviour and, on many occasions, children were distracted or admonished in negative ways. Follow-up on children's behaviour enhances the quality of ECD programmes.

A study by Bierman and Erath (2006) highlighted that the teacher-led curriculum targeting the behaviour of ECD learners is dependent on the teacher-child relationship. High levels of teacher sensitivity and support are associated with reductions in aggressive behaviour by children. Conflict resolution management styles by teachers provide models for ECD children that influence their approach towards their peers by promoting self-regulation of attention-seeking behaviour (Asonibare, 2004). However, a negative approach to guidance and counselling compromises the quality of ECD programmes.

Guided practice activities designed for ECD children utilise pictures, role-playing and group interaction to teach social skills associated with emotion, understanding and social problem solving (Hyde & Kabiru, 2003). Guided practice for ECD children promotes children's self-knowledge, confidence and self-actualisation, though it may not be possible sometimes due to ECD teacher incompetence. In contrast, Bierman and Erath (2006) explain that children became less impulsive with the use of guided practice strategies by the teachers which helped young children to develop their cognitive capacities to recognise and assess social problems, foster self-regulation and positive social interaction in the classroom. The study further highlighted that, training ECD children to use alternative thinking strategies in Head Start programmes showed positive levels of social ratings at the end of one year (Bierman & Erath, 2006). The use of alternative thinking strategies enhances ECD children's ability to fit into societal roles. The alternative thinking strategies included helping, taking turns, being a funny and friendly play partner, being able to identify own and others' feelings, self-control, complimenting self and others and being able to calm down, identify problems and select the best solution. The study sought to investigate Zimbabwean teacher abilities to offer positive guidance and counselling services to ECD learners.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Guidance and counselling offered by ECD teachers should focus on character development, moral education and habit formation (Oniye & Durosaro, 2009). It would appear that guidance and counselling is a prerequisite in ECD classes. However, all stakeholders concerned have little or no skills to offer guidance and counselling to ECD children. The present study sought to establish the quality of guidance and counselling services and teacher ability to offer guidance and counselling to ECD children in Harare primary schools. Specifically the study sought to provide an answer to the main research question: What is the quality status of ECD guidance and counselling in Harare primary schools. The study is part of a larger study assessing the quality of ECD programmes in Harare primary schools in Zimbabwe.

4. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was used for this study. The qualitative approach was preferred because it is the most appropriate where perceptions of participants are sought in situ (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative research, a phenomenon is viewed in its entirety or



holistically. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), investigators should not impose their assumptions, limitations or delimitations and accept that reality exists as the respondent sees it. The present study intended to capture the participants' views and understanding of guidance and counselling of ECD children in ECD settings and not the researcher's assumptions. Terell (2012) notes that, in qualitative research, the researcher records fully, accurately and in an unbiased way what s/he sees and hears from the respondents. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note that qualitative studies emphasise the natural settings, entities and processes that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount or intensity. Since this study sought to observe the entities of teaching and learning processes in the natural settings of the ECD learning environment and describe the quality or lack thereof in ECD programmes in Harare primary schools, qualitative research was thus deemed suitable for this study.

Patton (2002) states that in qualitative research, direct quotations and excerpts from interviews can be cited as they present the participants' perceptions. In the present study, verbal quotes from ECD teachers and administrators were relevant as they captured the participants' perceptions guidance and counselling of ECD children in ECD settings. As qualitative research is the interpretive study of a specified phenomenon or problem, the researcher becomes central to the analysis of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The qualitative approach is naturalistic in nature and takes the geographical, physical, historical and cultural contexts into consideration (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (2009) agrees that qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. The present study focused on the quality of guidance and counselling of ECD children in ECD settings the geographical, historical and cultural context of the primary schools and therefore the qualitative methodology was suitable.

4.1 Sample

The sample was purposively sampled and was drawn from 10 primary schools in Harare consisting of 10 school heads, 10 ECD teachers and 10 ECD parents (14 males and 16 females). The sample was purposively sampled in Harare urban because that is where the researcher resides. Only school heads involved in the guidance and counselling of ECD children in ECD settings, teachers and ECD parents were included in the sample.

4.2 Instruments

Three interview guides were used in this study. The in-depth interviews were chosen for their ability to expose attitudes, interests, feelings that are not obvious (Gay et al. 2011). Interviews had the advantage that the researcher probed participants' responses to in-depth data about their experiences and feelings regarding guidance and counselling of ECD children in ECD settings. Observations were also made of the stakeholders' ability to guide and counsel ECD children.

5. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The researcher conducted the in-depth interviews after discussing the ethical issues. The researchers visited the purposively sampled schools and interviewed the participants at their convenient times. The school heads were interviewed in the morning, the teachers after dismissing the ECD children while the ECD parents were interviewed at the time of fetching their children. Permission to carry out the interviews was sought from the school head.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

Data was thematically analysed. The analysis included reporting verbatim the participants' responses.

7. ETHICAL ISSUES

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Permission was sought prior to in-depth interviews. Participants were referred to with pseudonyms.

8. DATA PRESENTATION

8.1 Guidance and counselling of ECD children by school heads

Data from the school heads' in-depth interviews on guidance and counselling in ECD highlighted that very little guidance and counselling was being offered for ECD children in Harare primary schools. To this effect the school heads highlighted that, "The school holds guidance and counselling sessions for the whole school once a week but nothing specific for ECD children". This could be because the school heads were not familiar with the guiding and counselling of ECD children. They noted that guidance and counselling was offered at least once a week and sometimes once a month for the whole school but little was being done for ECD



children. This could be because the subject is not examinable as was observed in the documentation that it was accorded very little time in the school timetable. In this view, the school heads noted that, “The school holds guidance and counselling sessions at least once a month for the whole school but not specifically for ECD children”. The school heads noted that they listened and offered advice to parents when necessary with difficulty since they had no requisite skills. In this regard the following excerpt from the school heads notes that, “If parents or guardians have issues that need guidance and counselling, I usually do it sometimes with the help of my deputy but it is difficult since I am not a trained counsellor”. They also revealed that they never made a follow-up on whether the ECD teachers offered guidance and counselling. To this view the school heads are quoted saying, “I have never made a follow up on whether the ECD teachers offer guidance and counselling in their classrooms because I do not know what to look for”. This could be because the school heads are not trained to handle ECD children let alone counsel them. The school heads further highlighted that the schools offered counselling in the ECD classrooms when need arose. The following quote highlights the view above from the school heads, “The school holds guidance and counselling sessions as need arises but very little is being done for ECD children”.

The school heads further revealed that the counsellors found it difficult to counsel ECD children as they did not have the skills to counsel these very young children. In this view, the school heads noted that, “The counsellors find it difficult to guide and counsel the ECD children because the ECD children have limited language to express themselves”. The school heads also noted that the ECD children had limited language skills to express themselves. The school heads admitted that they did not have the skills required to counsel the ECD children. In this regard the school heads noted that, “The school finds it difficult to offer guidance and counselling to ECD children because they have limited skills to do so but we comfort them if they show emotional distress” The school heads further highlighted that the ECD policy was silent about the guidance and counselling of ECD children. The school heads are quoted below saying, “The counsellors and I do not know how to counsel ECD children and the ECD policy is rather silent on guidance and counselling”. Furthermore, the school heads revealed that they do not expect ECD teachers to guide ECD children since they also did not know how to guide and counsel ECD children. To this view they are quoted saying, “I do not expect the teachers to guide and counsel ECD children because I also do not know how to help ECD children to express themselves and the policy is not helpful

8.2 Guidance and counselling of ECD children by ECD teachers

Findings from in-depth interviews of ECD teachers revealed that few or no guidance and counselling services were being offered to ECD children. The teachers expressed that they only guided their ECD children through play and adult-guided activities like painting and drawing. The excerpt from one of the teachers highlights that, “I only guide the children through play and teacher directed activities”. They also highlighted that they listened to parents and gave advice if they could but they did not have the skills to counsel ECD children and parents. In this view the teachers noted that, “If parents have problems that they need to share I listen and offer a bit of advice if I can”. The teachers noted that they received brief theoretical courses at college and university but never got the practical guidance and counselling skills for ECD children. In this view an ECD teacher reveals that, “I offer a bit of guidance during activities but no counselling at all because I am not practically trained for it. The ECD teachers revealed that they discussed with parents if children were stressed. In this view one teacher is quoted saying, “I talk to guardians when an ECD child is distressed so that the parents or guardians improve the home background of the child”.

8.3 Guidance and counselling of ECD children as perceived by ECD parents

Data from the ECD parents’ responses to in-depth interviews on the quality of guidance and counselling services in ECD revealed that parents knew very little about counselling being offered in the ECD classrooms. To this view the parents are quoted saying, “I hear in parents’ meetings that children get guidance and counselling here and there but I do not have the details of how this is done”. The parents knew that the teachers offered guidance to children through rules and regulations and to parents on issues pertaining to ECD children. To this view one ECD parent noted that, “I know that my child loves his teacher so much and listens to any rules that the teacher gives him”. The parents noted that occasionally they got advice from the school heads and teachers if they required it. To this view the teacher noted that, “The teacher sometimes guides me on how to teach and guide my child at home”

9. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings from the school heads’ interviews on guidance and counselling in ECD showed that generally the schools offered guidance and counselling for older primary school children, but minimal for ECD children. The poor provision of guidance and counselling for ECD children maybe because the ECD policy does not include this component which relates to Chireshe’s (2006) finding that there was no mandatory School Guidance and Counselling policy in Zimbabwe, leaving individual schools to decide whether to offer guidance and counselling and when and how to offer them. The lack of guidance and counselling in ECD could also be linked to the lack of planning for the school guidance and counselling component in Zimbabwean schools (Chireshe & Venter, 2012). A related



finding by Okeke and Ani (2006) observed that ECD centres had not established guidance and counselling units in Nigerian schools thereby jeopardising the quality of ECD education and care even though guidance and counselling helps children develop socially, physically, psychologically and emotionally.

The school heads also noted that the school counsellors found it difficult to provide guidance and counselling services to ECD children as they did not have the practical skills to guide and counsel the 4-5year-olds. The ECD teachers also mentioned that they did not have the skills and training to counsel ECD children. Similarly, Oniye and Durosaro (2009) noted that ECD teachers in Nigeria lacked guidance and counselling skills for ECD children. On the contrary, a European study by Miranda (2004) showed that ECD teachers had skills in behaviour guidance in which they supported children in rationalising and talking through their conflicts. The lack of guidance and counselling skills is viewed by Chireshe (2006) in an earlier Zimbabwean school study as having a negative effect on the School Guidance Counseling services offered. The school heads' lack of guidance and counselling skills maybe because they have not been trained in the area (Chireshe & Mapfumo, 2005; Britto, Yoshikawa & Boller, 2011; Excell & Linington, 2011). The current study further revealed that the lack of guidance and counselling services in ECD was due to the children's limited language which made it difficult for them to express themselves even though they revealed some of these problems through dramatic play and pictures. A Namibian study by Hyde and Kabiru (2003) revealed that guidance and counselling in ECD involved the use of activities which utilised pictures, role playing and group interactions to teach social skills associated with emotion, understanding and social problem solving since children have limited language abilities. In this case, the use of art, drama and role play can be used to counsel ECD children to improve the quality of ECD programmes.

The ECD teachers' views indicate that their teacher-led activities and curriculum offered guidance but little or no counselling to ECD children. Hyde and Kabiru's (2003) Mali report is supported by the current finding that teacher-led curriculum targeted behaviour guidance of ECD children is dependent on a positive teacher-child relationship. The failure to offer counselling may be due to the fact that ECD teachers were overwhelmed by the large ECD classes they taught. It may also be because they lacked guidance and counselling skills since they had no practical skills training. Parents' views in the study indicated that they did not know whether the ECD teachers/school provided counselling to ECD children, but they believed that their ECD children were enjoying school and coping well socially.

10. CONCLUSIONS

From the findings of this study the following conclusions are made; school heads were not competent in offering guidance and counselling and were not able to set guidance and counselling standards for ECD teachers, ECD teachers were not fully equipped with guidance and counselling skills for ECD children due to lack of training, and that ECD parents were not well versed with what went on in ECD classrooms regarding the guidance and counselling of ECD children.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended practical training of guidance and counselling skills to ECD teachers, school counsellors and school heads by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education in liaison with the teacher training colleges and universities would improve the guidance and counselling services offered;

The quality of guidance and counselling services would be promoted by

- a) prioritisation of the practical training of guidance and counselling for ECD trainee teachers, school heads and counsellors specifically for ECD children by policy makers;
- b) training of practicing teachers, school heads and counsellors in practical guidance and counselling skills by policy implementers; and
- c) production of well-trained and practically equipped teachers in guidance and counselling of ECD children by colleges and universities.

All stakeholders would be involved in the provision of guidance and counselling.



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