



Center-based early childhood care and education program quality: A South African study



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ABSTRACT

We report on the first representative sample survey of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program quality to be conducted in South Africa ($n = 242$ ECCE centers). The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale—Revised (ECERS-R) and Infant–Toddler Environmental Rating Scale—Revised (ITERS-R) were used to assess ECCE quality. A Center Management Quality measure based on South African center licensing requirements was constructed and administered to center supervisors. We found that classes for both younger and older children fall just above the ‘minimal’ quality level on both measures. Regression analyses were conducted to establish determinants of center quality. Predictors included: licensing and subsidy status, teacher information (age, highest qualification and years in ECCE), presence of a Reception Year class in the center, teacher–child ratio, weekly fees, management quality, center support and parent involvement. Outcome measures were ITERS-R and ECERS-R total scale scores. Fees charged and center management capacity were predicted the quality of the care and learning environment. The relationship between level of child deprivation in the community (as an indicator of child poverty) and ITERS-R and ECERS-R total scores was examined separately. A significant negative relationship was observed between program quality and the level of child deprivation in the area served by the center. Implications for improving center quality for disadvantaged children in South Africa are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since democratic government in South Africa was achieved in 1994, access to early childhood services of different kinds has been promoted as both a human resource capacity building strategy and a means to achieving equity for poor children. This mirrors a trend in many low- and middle-income countries, strengthened by international evidence for the value of early intervention (Engle et al., 2007, 2011), and commitment to Education for All Goals. Between 1994 and 2013, a number of policies and plans have been piloted for the expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services.

ECCE services for children under five years of age fall under the auspices of an interdepartmental committee including the National Departments of Social Development, Basic Education and Health. Each of the nine provincial governments is responsible

for regulating provision of services. An Integrated Early Childhood Development Programme of Action provides the policy framework for services to children at home, in the community, and in ECCE centers. The South African Government's Medium Term Strategic Framework for 2009–2014 (Government of South Africa, 2009) prioritizes access to quality ECCE center services and White Paper 5: Early Childhood Development (Department of Education, 2001a) provides for a universal reception (pre-primary) year for five year olds as part of the schooling system. In 2013, 91% of Grade-1 children were reported to have attended a formal reception class (Department of Basic Education, 2015a).

Increasing concern about poor schooling outcomes has fueled political support for ECCE services in South Africa. In 2014, average achievement at Grade 3 on the Annual National Assessments was a mark of 56% for literacy and 56% for mathematics, with greatest underachievement in the poorest areas (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Measures to address this include attention to early childhood services as well as interventions in the schooling system. National Early Learning Development Standards were introduced in 2009 (Department of Education, 2009) and a

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National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four (Department of Basic Education, 2015b) which was piloted in 2015.

Evidence to support policy is emerging. Recent South African studies have indicated an association between preschool attendance and better schooling outcomes. A study conducted under the auspices of the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), 2011) found that children with longer durations of preschool had higher scores in reading and mathematics at Grade 3. Two years greatly increased scores compared with one but after this, tended to level off. National Income Dynamics Study data (Gustafsson, 2010) also indicate that children who have received pre-primary schooling perform better than those who have not. The finding is most robust in rural contexts and is independent of home background.

Approximately 35% of children in South Africa attended a formal ECCE facility or program including crèches, day-care centers, playgroups, and pre-primary schools in 2014 (Statistics South Africa, 2015). However, only 20% of children in the bottom two income quintiles (applies to 58% of 0–4 year olds) access any form of ECCE (Harrison, 2012). The sector of the population that is most in need of quality support for early learning is least likely to access it. A significant barrier is cost. Improving the quality of ECCE centers through registration/licensing with provincial governments, expanded government subsidies for centers serving poor children, and an extensive training program to improve staff qualifications remains the major focus of government plans for younger children (Biersteker, 2011; Department of Public Works, 2011; Government of South Africa, 2009), and is driven by recognition that services must be of high quality if they are to place children on a better educational trajectory and improve the quality of learning in formal schooling (Department of Basic Education, 2010; Gustafsson, 2010; Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), 2011). The quality imperative has also been reaffirmed as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education agenda for action of Education for All (UNESCO, 2010) to which South Africa is a signatory.

1.1. The South African approach to quality ECCE

The model of quality espoused by the Government of South Africa and ECCE training institutions, follows universal views of quality ECCE as promoted in the USA, United Kingdom, and by international ECCE bodies, such as the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (Profeta, 2012; Department for Education, 2014; International Step by Step Association (ISSA), 2011; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). From this perspective high-quality care provides children with a wide variety of age-appropriate activities to support development across domains: a focus on language; a balance of free choice and teacher-directed activities; and warm teacher–child interaction that promotes learning. In keeping with international practice, and of particular importance in South Africa, are the acceptance of cultural diversity and the inclusion of local as well as global materials and content in the program. The South African National Curriculum Framework promotes playful pedagogy for the delivery of the curriculum and, as far as possible, mother tongue as the medium for learning and teaching. However the guiding framework and ECCE program regulations are no different from what might be found in many other ECCE settings around the world.

1.2. Question of quality

While the definition of quality is relative and complex, international evidence indicates that children who attend high-quality programs have better outcomes in several developmental domains.

For example, Burchinal et al. (2000) found that higher-quality child care related to higher measures of cognitive and language development and communication skills over time for infants 6–36 months even after adjusting for certain child and family characteristics. Love, Harrison, Sagi-Schwartz, van Ijzendoorn, and Ross (2003) report that Early Head Start found positive cognitive, language and socio-emotional development gains for children enrolled in a center program that provided high levels of good quality care. The National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network (ECCRN) study found high quality care to be related to better cognitive outcomes, less impulsivity, and better social competence at 4.5 years (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003; NICHD Early Childhood Care Research Network, 2005).

Better quality ECCE predicts better school outcomes. Higher-quality early child care of children 6–54 months promotes mathematics and reading achievement of low income children in middle childhood (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2009). Sylva et al. (2006) found that the educational quality of ECCE classrooms is related to enhanced cognitive and language development. While most of the evidence is from higher-income country studies, findings from low- and middle-income countries in the Global South are emerging. This study seeks to contribute to the body of evidence.

For example, Aboud (2006) found that low-income preschool children in Bangladesh had significantly higher school readiness test scores than children who had not attended preschools. They also performed better on vocabulary and verbal and non-verbal reasoning. Classroom quality was significantly associated with group cognitive score. In Kenya, Mwaura (2009) found Madrasa Resource Center preschools to be of higher quality than conventional community preschools. Children who had attended Madrasa centers performed significantly better on measures of language and cognition than children who had had no preschool intervention or had attended community preschools (Mwaura, Sylva, & Malmberg, 2008). In South India, Rao (2010) demonstrated the influence of preschool quality on the development of 4 year old children from poor rural families. In a Cambodian study, Rao et al. (2012) found that children who had attended state preschools with better-trained staff and more educational resources performed better on developmental measures than children in either community preschools or home programs. They note that even where programs might be regarded as being of poorer quality by standards used in higher income countries, children in disadvantaged circumstances benefitted. Consistent with findings from higher-income countries, where program quality was better, child outcomes were improved. A South African evaluation of interventions to improve ECCE, Dawes, Biersteker, and Hendricks (2012) found that children in poor rural and peri-urban communities who had attended preschools where teachers had received training and support significantly outperformed children who had no preschool experience when they entered reception classes at age five.

1.3. Predictors of ECCE quality

The definition and measurement of quality indicators for ECCE settings is complex and contested, given variable resources in different contexts and differing cultural values placed on children developing particular attributes and skills (Myers, 2006; Nsamenang, 2006; Penn, 2005; Tobin, 2005). However, dimensions commonly focused upon include structural variables such as the physical setting, teacher–child ratio, group size, teacher qualifications, learning materials, and process variables including classroom interactions.

There is broad agreement that elements such as a holistic curriculum, active child play with concrete materials, and sensitive, mediated caregiver/child interaction contribute to better child

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