

Assessment of the Implementation of Early Childhood Education in Selected Primary Schools of Lusaka District, Zambia

Betty Pungwa Musenge¹, *Phillip Mubanga², Sheila Mulenga Mubanga³

¹Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ), Lusaka, Zambia

²Department of Accountancy, School of Business, ZCAS University, Zambia

³Ministry of General Education, Lusaka, Zambia

*Correspondence Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400615>

Received: 29 April 2026; Accepted: 04 May 2026; Published: 20 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is widely recognised as a critical determinant of cognitive, social, and academic development, with strong long-term returns for human capital formation. Extensive empirical evidence demonstrates that early investment in education yields substantial economic and social benefits, particularly in developing country contexts (Heckman, 2006; World Bank, 2018). In Zambia, ECE has been progressively integrated into the formal education system through key policy reforms, including 'Educating Our Future', and the 'Zambia Education Curriculum Framework'. Despite these advancements, the effectiveness of implementation remains uneven, particularly in high density urban settings characterised by resource constraints and institutional limitations.

This study examines the implementation of Early Childhood Education in selected primary schools in Lusaka District using a qualitative case study design. Data was collected from fifty respondents through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation checklists, and analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings reveal that ECE implementation is significantly constrained by inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, high teacher pupil ratios, and weak institutional support systems.

The study advances the concept of policy implementation dissonance to explain the disconnect between policy expansion and practical delivery. It argues that while policy reforms have successfully expanded access to ECE, the quality of implementation remains insufficient to realise expected developmental outcomes. The paper concludes that a strategic shift toward quality focused interventions, supported by increased investment, strengthened teacher capacity, and improved governance systems, is essential for maximising the impact of ECE in Zambia.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Implementation, Zambia, Policy Implementation Dissonance, Learning Environment, School Readiness

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) represents one of the most critical stages in the educational trajectory of an individual, forming the foundation upon which cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural competencies are developed. Research in developmental psychology and economics has consistently demonstrated that early childhood interventions yield disproportionately high returns compared to investments made at later stages of education (Heckman, 2006). These returns are not only reflected in improved academic performance but also in enhanced labour market outcomes, reduced social inequality, and improved overall well being (World Bank, 2018).

In recognition of these benefits, ECE has become a central component of education policy globally. International

frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals emphasise the importance of inclusive and equitable access to quality early childhood education as a prerequisite for lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015). In developing countries, where disparities in educational access and outcomes are more pronounced, ECE is increasingly viewed as a strategic intervention for addressing structural inequalities and promoting human capital development.

The importance of early childhood education is further reinforced by evidence from global child development initiatives, which emphasise that access to quality early learning opportunities significantly enhances school readiness, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds (UNICEF, 2019). These findings underscore the role of ECE not only as an educational intervention but also as a broader social protection mechanism aimed at reducing intergenerational inequality.

In Zambia, the evolution of Early Childhood Education reflects a broader transformation of the education system from a fragmented, largely religious church mission-driven model to a more coordinated and policy driven framework under government oversight. Historical accounts indicate that education during the colonial period was largely provided by missionary organisations, with limited state involvement (Mwanakatwe, 1968; Snelson, 1974). Following independence, the government progressively assumed responsibility for education, culminating in comprehensive policy reforms such as *Educating Our Future* (Ministry of Education, 1996), which formally recognised the importance of early childhood education within the national system.

The post-independence evolution of the Zambian education system has been extensively documented, with scholars noting that early reforms were primarily focused on expanding access to primary and secondary education, often with limited attention to early childhood development (Kelly, 1999). This historical legacy continues to shape the structure and prioritisation of education policy in Zambia today.

Subsequent policy developments, including the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2013), further integrated ECE into the formal education structure, particularly through its introduction in public primary schools. These reforms were intended to improve school readiness, enhance learning outcomes, and promote equitable access to education.

However, despite these policy advancements, significant challenges persist in the implementation of ECE programmes, particularly in urban districts such as Lusaka. High enrolment levels, limited infrastructure, inadequate teaching materials, and shortages of trained teachers continue to constrain the effective delivery of early childhood education (Mutale, 2014; Nyirenda, 2013; Matafwali & Munsaka, 2011).

This study advances the argument that these challenges are not merely operational but reflect a deeper structural issue, conceptualised as policy implementation dissonance. This concept captures the disconnect between policy commitments to expanding access to ECE and the practical realities of implementation, where insufficient resources and institutional capacity undermine the achievement of policy objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been widely recognised as a critical investment in human capital development, with far reaching implications for cognitive, social, and economic outcomes. Empirical evidence demonstrates that children who participate in high quality early childhood programmes exhibit improved academic performance, enhanced social skills, and higher levels of long-term productivity (Heckman, 2006; OECD, 2012). These benefits are particularly pronounced for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where early interventions can mitigate the effects of socio-economic inequality (UNESCO, 2015; World Bank, 2018).

The effectiveness of ECE programmes is closely linked to the quality of key inputs, including infrastructure, teacher qualifications, and the availability of teaching and learning materials. Neuman (2008) emphasises that the learning environment plays a fundamental role in shaping early literacy development, while Morrow (1990) highlights the importance of classroom organisation and resource availability in promoting active engagement. Similarly, Hendrickson and Williams (2009) argue that instructional materials are essential for facilitating

experiential learning, which is central to early childhood pedagogy.

Foundational work on early literacy development further emphasises that children's exposure to print-rich environments and structured learning interactions significantly enhances cognitive and language acquisition during early childhood (Adams, 1990). This highlights the importance of integrating literacy-supportive materials within early learning environments.

Beyond material inputs, the quality of teacher child interactions is a critical determinant of learning outcomes. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism underscores the importance of guided interaction in facilitating cognitive development, while Piaget (1952) emphasises the role of active engagement in knowledge construction. These theoretical perspectives highlight that effective ECE requires not only access to resources but also the capacity to utilise them in developmentally appropriate ways.

Early Childhood Education in Africa

In the African context, the expansion of Early Childhood Education has been accompanied by persistent structural challenges that affect both access and quality. While many countries have adopted policies aimed at promoting ECE, implementation remains uneven due to limited funding, institutional weaknesses, and competing development priorities (Pence, 2004; Arthur, 2008).

Furthermore, early analyses of ECE systems in Africa highlight the structural nature of these challenges. Aman (2001) observes that early childhood education across the continent has historically been characterised by limited public investment, weak institutional frameworks, and heavy reliance on community and private provision. These conditions have constrained the development of equitable and sustainable ECE systems, particularly in low-income settings. As a result, disparities in access and quality persist between urban and rural areas, as well as between public and private institutions.

In addition, the role of cultural and socio-economic dynamics in shaping early childhood education systems across Africa has been widely acknowledged. Research suggests that the diversity of educational contexts across the continent requires locally adaptive models of ECE that respond to community needs and socio-cultural realities (Arthur, 2008).

More recent studies reinforce these findings, noting that public provision of ECE is often characterised by inadequate infrastructure, high pupil teacher ratios, and limited availability of teaching materials (Pence, 2004; UNESCO, 2015). These challenges not only affect the quality of learning environments but also limit the ability of teachers to implement learner centred pedagogies. Consequently, the expansion of ECE in Africa has often been quantitative rather than qualitative, with increased enrolment not necessarily translating into improved developmental outcomes.

Early Childhood Education in Zambia

In Zambia, the development of Early Childhood Education has been shaped by broader education reforms aimed at expanding access and improving quality. Policy frameworks such as *Educating Our Future* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the *Zambia Education Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 2013) have played a central role in institutionalising ECE within the national education system. These policies emphasise the importance of early learning as a foundation for school readiness and lifelong education.

Despite these policy advancements, empirical evidence indicates that the implementation of ECE in Zambia remains constrained by significant structural challenges. Studies by Mutale (2014), Nyirenda (2013), and Matafwali and Munsaka (2011) consistently highlight infrastructural deficiencies, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to teaching and learning materials as major barriers to effective delivery. These challenges are particularly pronounced in urban districts such as Lusaka, where high enrolment pressures place additional strain on already limited resources.

Further evidence suggests that teacher capacity represents a critical constraint in ECE implementation. Shikwasha (2014) and Kasakula (2016) note that many teachers assigned to early childhood classes lack specialised training in ECE pedagogy, limiting their ability to deliver age appropriate and learner centred

instruction. This shortage of trained personnel is compounded by high teacher pupil ratios, which reduce opportunities for individualised learning and interaction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while Zambia has made significant progress in expanding access to ECE, the quality of implementation remains uneven. This highlights the need for a more critical examination of the relationship between policy expansion and implementation capacity. There is a need to move beyond descriptive accounts of challenges and develop a more analytical understanding of how systemic constraints shape educational outcomes. This study addresses this gap by advancing the concept of policy implementation dissonance, which captures the disconnect between policy commitments and practical realities in the provision of Early Childhood Education.

Evidence from rural Zambia further highlights the persistence of literacy-related challenges among early learners, particularly in under-resourced environments where limited exposure to print materials constrains early reading development (Zimba, 2011). This reinforces the importance of strengthening foundational literacy within ECE programmes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is anchored on the premise that the effectiveness of Early Childhood Education (ECE) depends not only on policy formulation and expansion of access, but critically on the degree of alignment between policy intentions and implementation capacity at the institutional level. Existing literature emphasises that the quality of early childhood education is strongly influenced by the availability of key inputs such as infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, and institutional support systems (OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2015).

While these studies provide a foundation for understanding ECE effectiveness, they do not sufficiently explain the persistent gap between policy commitments and actual implementation outcomes in many developing country contexts. To address this gap, this study advances the concept of policy implementation dissonance as an analytical lens for understanding the divergence between policy intentions and practical delivery.

In this study, policy implementation dissonance is defined as the systematic divergence between formally articulated education policies and their practical execution within school environments. To move beyond a descriptive interpretation, the concept is operationalised across three interrelated analytical dimensions as follows:

(i) Policy–Practice Gap

This dimension captures the extent to which ECE policy provisions are translated into actual classroom practices. It reflects discrepancies between curriculum expectations, pedagogical guidelines, and observed teaching and learning conditions. Evidence from education systems in developing contexts suggests that policy frameworks often fail to translate into effective classroom practices due to contextual constraints (Pence, 2004; Arthur, 2008).

(ii) Resource Alignment Deficit

This dimension refers to the mismatch between policy expansion and the availability of critical inputs such as physical infrastructure, teaching and learning materials, and human resources. The importance of these inputs is well established in the literature, with studies showing that inadequate learning environments and insufficient instructional materials significantly undermine early childhood learning outcomes (Neuman, 2008; Morrow, 1990; Hendrickson & Williams, 2009).

This dimension is directly reflected in the empirical findings of this study (Tables 3 and 4), which indicate significant inadequacies in learning environments and instructional materials across the sampled schools.

(iii) Institutional Capacity Constraints

This dimension captures limitations in the broader support systems required for effective implementation, including teacher training, supervision, monitoring, and administrative support. Research in African education

systems highlights that weak institutional capacity remains a major barrier to effective implementation of early childhood programmes (Aman, 2001; Pence, 2004).

The findings presented in Table 5, particularly regarding limited trained personnel and high teacher pupil ratios, illustrate the manifestation of these constraints at the school level.

Framework Structure and Analytical Link

These three dimensions collectively mediate the relationship between policy inputs and educational outcomes. While policy frameworks in Zambia have successfully expanded access to ECE, deficiencies across these dimensions weaken implementation quality, resulting in suboptimal developmental outcomes. This aligns with broader empirical evidence showing that expansion of access without corresponding investment in quality inputs often leads to diminished educational outcomes (World Bank, 2018). Thus, the framework conceptualises ECE effectiveness as a function of:

- (a) Policy Inputs (Infrastructure, Materials, Institutional Support)
- (b) Mediating Condition (Policy Implementation Dissonance)
- (c) Implementation Quality (Teaching Practices, Learning Environment)
- (d) Outcomes (School Readiness, Cognitive and Social Development)

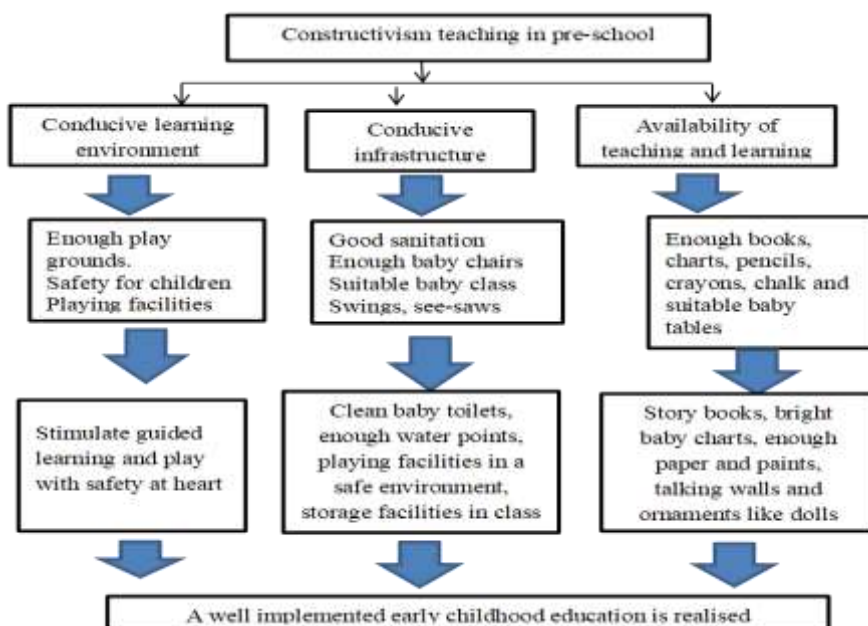
Theoretical Anchoring

The framework is further supported by three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Social Constructivism Theory emphasises that learning occurs through interaction with others and the environment (Lev Vygotsky, 1978). Second, Ecological Systems Theory highlights the influence of interconnected environmental systems on child development (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Third, Cognitive Development Theory underscores the role of active engagement and experiential learning in knowledge construction (Jean Piaget, 1952).

Analytical Contribution

By operationalising policy implementation dissonance into measurable dimensions, this framework provides a structured basis for analysing how systemic constraints translate into weakened educational outcomes. It allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of challenges and offers a more rigorous explanation of why policy reforms in ECE have not fully translated into improved learning conditions.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' compilation

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in selected primary schools within Lusaka District. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their natural context, particularly where the research seeks to understand complex social and institutional phenomena (John W Creswell, 2012).

The case study design was employed to allow for detailed investigation of ECE implementation within real life institutional settings, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Robert K Yin, 2014).

Study Area and Sample

The study was conducted in five purposively selected government primary schools within Lusaka District. These schools were selected based on their active implementation of ECE programmes and their representation of typical urban public-school conditions characterised by high enrolment levels and resource constraints.

The target population comprised school administrators and teachers directly involved in ECE implementation. A total of fifty respondents participated in the study, including five head teachers, ten senior teachers, ten ECE teachers, and twenty-five non-ECE teachers. The inclusion of multiple respondent categories ensured a comprehensive institutional perspective, consistent with recommendations for inclusive sampling in educational research (Kasonde-Ng'andu, 2014).

Sampling Techniques

A combination of purposive and simple random sampling techniques was employed. Purposive sampling was used to select head teachers, senior teachers, and ECE teachers due to their direct involvement in programme implementation and their ability to provide informed insights (Kombo & Tromp, 2006).

Simple random sampling was applied to select non-ECE teachers to minimise selection bias and enhance representativeness. The integration of multiple sampling techniques enhances the credibility of qualitative findings by incorporating both expert and general perspectives (John W Creswell, 2012).

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using multiple qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation checklists.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with head teachers and senior teachers to obtain in-depth insights into policy implementation, administrative practices, and institutional challenges. Focus group discussions were used to capture shared experiences and collective perspectives among teachers, allowing for interaction-based data generation (Mack et al., 2011).

Observation checklists were employed to assess the physical learning environment, availability of teaching and learning materials, classroom organisation, and sanitation facilities. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation, which enhances the validity and robustness of qualitative research findings (Norman K Denzin, 1978).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using a rigorous thematic analysis approach following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved six systematic stages:

Data Familiarisation

Audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. The researcher engaged in

repeated reading of transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the data.

Initial Code Generation

Codes were generated using a hybrid inductive deductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data while being guided by the study's conceptual framework.

Searching for Themes

Related codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting key dimensions such as learning environment, teaching materials, institutional support, and implementation challenges.

Reviewing Themes

Themes were refined through iterative comparison with the data to ensure internal consistency and distinctiveness across categories.

Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined and aligned with the analytical framework of policy implementation dissonance.

Interpretation and Reporting

Themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and linked to empirical findings presented in Tables 3-5.

This structured approach enhances the transparency and analytical rigor of the qualitative analysis process.

Reliability and Validity Measures

To ensure the credibility, reliability, and validity of the findings, several strategies were employed:

- (i) **Triangulation:** Data were collected from multiple sources (interviews, focus groups, observations) to ensure consistency of findings (Denzin, 1978).
- (ii) **Inter-coder Reliability:** Coding decisions were reviewed and cross-checked to ensure consistency in interpretation.
- (iii) **Audit Trail:** Detailed documentation of coding procedures and analytical decisions was maintained to enhance transparency.
- (iv) **Member Validation:** Selected participants were consulted to verify the accuracy of interpretations.

These procedures are consistent with established qualitative research standards (Kothari, 2004; Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and voluntary participation was ensured through informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding personal identifiers from the data.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from relevant educational authorities and school administrations. Adherence to ethical principles is essential to protect participants and ensure the integrity of the research process (John W Creswell, 2012).

RESULTS

The findings of this study are presented at three levels; policy evolution, systemic implementation challenges, and empirical evidence from selected schools. This multi level analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of Early Childhood Education (ECE) implementation in Zambia.

Policy Evolution of ECE in Zambia

The development of Early Childhood Education in Zambia has been shaped by a series of policy reforms that progressively formalised its role within the national education system.

Table 1: Key Policy Milestones in the Development of ECE in Zambia

Policy / Document	Main Contribution to ECE	Relevance to the Study
<i>Focus on Learning</i> (Ministry of Education, 1992)	Recognised the need to improve education quality and access	Provided an early foundation for education reform
<i>Educating Our Future</i> (Ministry of Education, 1996)	Formally recognised the importance of early childhood learning	Marked a major policy shift towards institutionalising ECE
<i>Educational Statistical Bulletin</i> (Ministry of Education, 2007)	Provided education sector data useful for planning	Highlighted access and participation issues
<i>Zambia Education Curriculum Framework</i> (Ministry of Education, 2013)	Integrated ECE into the national curriculum structure	Strengthened curriculum standardisation and implementation

Source: Authors' compilation

The results in Table 1 show that Zambia has progressively moved towards formalising Early Childhood Education within the national education system. The policy trajectory demonstrates increasing recognition of ECE as a foundation for school readiness and long-term learning. However, the movement from policy recognition to effective implementation has remained uneven, particularly in relation to infrastructure, staffing, and learning materials.

Systemic Challenges Affecting ECE Implementation

Despite the existence of a strong policy framework, the implementation of ECE remains constrained by several systemic challenges, as highlighted in both the literature and empirical findings.

Table 2: Main Challenges Affecting ECE Implementation in Zambia

Challenge	Evidence from Literature	Implication for ECE Delivery
Inadequate infrastructure	Mutale (2014); Shikwasha (2014)	Limits access and affect classroom quality
Shortage of trained ECE teachers	Nyirenda (2013); Kasakula (2016)	Weakens learner centred and age-appropriate instruction
Limited learning materials	Mutale (2014); Ministry of Education (2013)	Reduces stimulation and weakens learning outcomes
Rural urban disparities	Shikwasha (2014); Kaneneka (2013)	Creates unequal access to quality ECE
Weak monitoring and financing	Ministry of Education (2013); Kasakula (2016)	Undermines policy implementation and sustainability

Source: Authors' compilation

The findings in Table 2 indicate that although Zambia has developed a policy foundation for ECE, implementation remains constrained by resource and capacity limitations. Infrastructure deficits are particularly pronounced in both rural and high-density urban areas, where some schools lack dedicated classrooms for young learners. This significantly affects the quality of the learning environment and reduces the ability of teachers to apply child centred methodologies.

Empirical Findings from Selected Schools

The study further examined how these systemic challenges manifest at the school level in Lusaka District.

The suitability of the learning environment was assessed as a key determinant of effective ECE implementation.

Table 3: Suitability of Learning Environment

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Suitable	9	18%
Not Suitable	41	82%
Total	50	100%

Source: Authors’ compilation

Table 3 shows that a substantial majority of respondents (82%) indicated that the learning environment was not suitable for Early Childhood Education. Key issues included overcrowding, lack of play facilities, inadequate sanitation, and poor classroom infrastructure. These findings reinforce the systemic infrastructure challenges identified in Table 2.

Table 4: Availability of Teaching and Learning Materials

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Adequate	10	20%
Inadequate	40	80%
Total	50	100%

Source: Authors’ compilation

Table 4 shows that 80% of respondents reported inadequate teaching and learning materials. This shortage limits the effectiveness of instruction and reduces opportunities for interactive and experiential learning, which are central to early childhood education.

Table 5: Teacher Capacity and Staffing Levels

Indicator	Observation
Availability of trained ECE teachers	Limited
Teacher pupil ratio	High (overcrowded classrooms)
Specialized ECE training	Inadequate
Support staff availability	Minimal

Source: Authors’ compilation

The findings indicate that most schools lack adequately trained ECE teachers. High teacher pupil ratios further constrain the delivery of learner-centred instruction, reinforcing the systemic issues highlighted earlier.

Developmental Outcomes of Quality ECE

While the findings highlight significant implementation challenges, the literature provides strong evidence of the potential benefits of quality Early Childhood Education.

Table 6: Expected Developmental Outcomes of Quality ECE

Developmental Area	Expected Outcome	Supporting Literature
Cognitive development	Improved problem-solving, memory, and reasoning skills	Piaget (1952); Montessori (2005)
Language and literacy	Improved vocabulary and early reading readiness	Hill (2009); Morrow (1990); Neuman (2008)
Social development	Improved peer interaction and cooperation	Vygotsky (1978); Mooney (2000)
Emotional development	Better self-regulation and adjustment	Montessori (2005); Munsaka (2013)
School readiness	Easier transition into primary education	Ministry of Education (2013); UNESCO (2015)

Source: Authors' compilation

The results suggest that quality ECE has the potential to significantly improve children's readiness for primary education. However, these developmental benefits are contingent upon the availability of trained teachers, appropriate learning materials, structured play environments, and supportive institutional systems.

Integrated Interpretation of Findings

Taken together, the findings reveal a clear pattern of policy implementation dissonance. While Zambia has established a strong policy framework for Early Childhood Education, the effectiveness of implementation is constrained by inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and insufficient institutional capacity.

This imbalance highlights the need to shift from an access-oriented approach to a quality focused ECE strategy, ensuring that policy expansion is matched with adequate investment in resources and systems required for effective delivery.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a persistent misalignment between policy aspirations and implementation realities in the provision of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Lusaka District. While Zambia has made notable progress in expanding access to ECE through successive policy reforms, the quality of implementation remains constrained by structural, resource, and institutional limitations. These findings provide empirical support for the concept of policy implementation dissonance, which captures the divergence between policy commitments and practical delivery.

A central finding of the study is the inadequacy of the learning environment, with a significant proportion of respondents indicating that existing infrastructure is not suitable for effective early childhood education. From a

theoretical perspective, this finding reinforces the principles of Social Constructivism, which emphasise that learning is shaped by interaction within a supportive environment (Vygotsky, 1978). In the absence of appropriate physical and pedagogical environments, opportunities for experiential learning are significantly reduced, thereby constraining cognitive and social development.

However, while infrastructure deficits are a critical constraint, it is important to consider alternative interpretations. In some contexts, effective pedagogical practices have been observed even in resource constrained environments, suggesting that teacher agency and innovation can partially mitigate infrastructural limitations. This implies that while physical conditions are important, they are not solely determinative of educational outcomes. Thus, the observed deficiencies may reflect not only infrastructural gaps but also variations in pedagogical capacity and institutional support.

The shortage of teaching and learning materials further compounds these challenges by limiting opportunities for interactive and experiential learning. Existing literature demonstrates that instructional materials are essential for facilitating early literacy and cognitive development (Neuman, 2008; Morrow, 1990). The findings of this study align with this evidence, as many respondents reported inadequate access to such materials.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the effectiveness of instructional materials is mediated by how they are utilised in classroom practice. Studies in comparable African contexts suggest that even where materials are available, their impact may be limited by insufficient teacher training or inappropriate pedagogical approaches (Pence, 2004; Arthur, 2008). This highlights the need to interpret material shortages within a broader framework of institutional capacity rather than as an isolated constraint.

Overcrowding and high teacher pupil ratios emerged as significant barriers to effective ECE delivery. These findings are consistent with broader evidence from developing country education systems, which indicates that rapid expansion of access without corresponding investment in staffing and infrastructure can lead to declining quality (World Bank, 2018). However, it is also possible that these outcomes reflect systemic policy trade-offs, where governments prioritise access as an immediate objective while deferring quality improvements due to fiscal constraints. This interpretation suggests that policy implementation dissonance may not always reflect failure, but rather competing policy priorities within resource-limited environments.

Comparative evidence from other Sub-Saharan African countries further strengthens the interpretation of these findings. In countries such as Kenya and South Africa, studies have similarly identified gaps between ECE policy frameworks and implementation capacity, particularly in relation to infrastructure, teacher training, and resource allocation (UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2019). These parallels suggest that the challenges identified in Zambia are not isolated but reflect broader structural patterns in ECE systems across the region.

At a deeper level, the findings indicate that policy implementation dissonance operates as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing policy practice gaps, resource alignment deficits, and institutional capacity constraints. The empirical evidence presented in Tables 3-5 demonstrates how these dimensions interact to weaken implementation quality. For instance, inadequate infrastructure (resource deficit) combined with limited teacher training (institutional constraint) results in ineffective classroom practices (policy practice gap), thereby limiting developmental outcomes.

While the study provides strong evidence of implementation challenges, it is also important to acknowledge that the findings are based on a limited sample of schools within Lusaka District. As such, caution must be exercised in generalising the results. However, the consistency of the findings with existing literature suggests that they may have broader relevance beyond the specific study context.

Overall, the discussion highlights that improving ECE outcomes in Zambia requires a shift from an access-oriented policy approach to a more integrated model that simultaneously addresses infrastructure, teacher capacity, and institutional support systems. Without such alignment, the expansion of ECE is unlikely to translate into meaningful improvements in learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in selected primary schools in Lusaka District and found that, despite significant policy progress in expanding access, the quality of implementation remains constrained by structural, resource, and institutional limitations. Key challenges identified include inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching and learning materials, high teacher pupil ratios, and insufficient institutional support systems.

The study makes an important contribution by advancing the concept of policy implementation dissonance as an analytical framework for understanding the gap between policy commitments and practical delivery. By operationalising this concept into measurable dimensions policy practice gaps, resource alignment deficits, and institutional capacity constraints the study moves beyond descriptive accounts and provides a more structured explanation of why policy reforms have not fully translated into improved learning conditions.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for a strategic shift from access driven reforms to a more balanced approach that prioritises quality alongside expansion. This requires coordinated investment in infrastructure, teacher development, and institutional capacity to ensure that policy intentions are effectively realised at the school level.

While the study provides valuable insights, its scope is limited to a small number of schools within Lusaka District. Future research should consider broader and more diverse samples across different regions, as well as the use of mixed method approaches to quantitatively validate the dimensions of policy implementation dissonance and enhance generalisability.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study underscore the need for a strategic shift in ECE policy from access driven reforms to quality focused interventions. Policymakers must prioritise infrastructure development, ensure sustainable financing for ECE programmes, and strengthen institutional capacity.

Investment in teacher recruitment and professional development is essential for improving instructional quality. Furthermore, the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation systems is critical for ensuring accountability and continuous improvement.

Strengthening ECE implementation should be viewed as a long-term investment in human capital development and national growth.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. MIT Press.
2. Aman, M. (2001). Early childhood development in Africa: Challenges and prospects. *African Educational Review*, 5(2), 45–60.
3. Arthur, J. A. (2008). *African diaspora identities: Negotiating culture in transnational migration*. Lexington Books.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
5. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
6. Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
7. Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
8. Heckman, J. J., Grunewald, R., & Reynolds, A. J. (2006). The dollars and cents of investing early: Cost-benefit analysis in early care and education. *Zero to Three*, 26(6), 10–17.

9. Hendrickson, J., & Williams, K. (2009). Audio-visual materials and early childhood learning outcomes. *Journal of Educational Media*, 34(2), 121–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13581650902980422>
10. Hill, S. (2009). Emergent literacy practices in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 32(1), 57–70.
11. Kaneneka, P. (2013). Assessment of the benefits of early childhood care, development and education provided by non-governmental organisations in rural areas: A case study of Chibombo District in Central Province of Zambia.
12. Kasakula, M. (2016). Implementation of early childhood education in public primary schools in Zambia (Unpublished manuscript).
13. Kasonde-Ng'andu, S. (2014). Writing a research proposal in education. University of Zambia Press.
14. Kelly, M. J. (1999). The origins and development of education in Zambia: From pre-colonial times to 1996. Image Publishers.
15. Kombo, D. K., & Tromp, D. L. A. (2006). Proposal and thesis writing: An introduction. Paulines Publications Africa.
16. Kothari, C. R. (2004). Research methodology: Methods and techniques (2nd ed.). New Age International.
17. Mack, N., Woodson, C., MacQueen, K. M., Guest, G., & Namey, E. (2011). Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide. Family Health International.
18. Matafwali, B., & Munsaka, E. (2011). Early childhood education in Zambia: A situational analysis. *Zambia Journal of Education*, 2(1), 1–15.
19. Ministry of Education. (1992). Focus on learning. Government of the Republic of Zambia.
20. Ministry of Education. (1996). Educating our future: National policy on education. Government of the Republic of Zambia.
21. Ministry of Education. (2007). Educational statistical bulletin. Government of the Republic of Zambia.
22. Ministry of Education. (2013). Zambia education curriculum framework. Curriculum Development Centre.
23. Mooney, C. G. (2000). Theories of childhood: An introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky. Redleaf Press.
24. Morrow, L. M. (1990). Preparing the classroom environment to promote literacy during play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 5(4), 537–554.
25. Mugenda, O. M., & Mugenda, A. G. (1999). Research methods: Quantitative and qualitative approaches. Acts Press.
26. Munsaka, E. (2013). Psychology of teaching and learning. University of Zambia Press.
27. Mutale, J. (2014). Provision of early childhood education in selected primary schools in Zambia (Unpublished master's dissertation, University of Zambia).
28. Mwanakatwe, J. M. (1968). The growth of education in Zambia since independence. Oxford University Press.
29. Neuman, S. B. (2008). The role of the learning environment in early literacy development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 23(4), 469–482. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2008.03.001>
30. Nyirenda, M. (2013). Infrastructure challenges in early childhood education in Zambia (Unpublished master's dissertation, University of Zambia).
31. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2012). Starting strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care. OECD Publishing.
32. Pence, A. (2004). Early childhood development in Africa: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(2), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03168109>
33. Piaget, J. (1952). The origins of intelligence in children. International Universities Press.
34. Shikwasha, R. A. (2014). Factors affecting the provision of early childhood education in government primary schools: A case of selected schools in Kabompo District of North-Western Province of Zambia (Unpublished dissertation).
35. Snelson, P. D. (1974). Educational development in Northern Rhodesia, 1883–1945. Longman.
36. UNESCO. (2015). Education for all 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges. UNESCO Publishing.

37. UNICEF. (2019). A world ready to learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education. UNICEF.
38. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.
39. World Bank. (2018). World development report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1096-1>
40. Zimba, R. (2011). Emergent literacy challenges in rural Zambia. African Journal of Literacy Studies, 4(2), 55–70.