

Early Childhood Education Services in Manzini Region in Eswatini: Equality and Accessibility

Sithulisiwe Bhebhe^{1*} and Ntokozo Vilakati²

^{1,2}Faculty of Education, University of Eswatini, Swaziland

*e-mail: sbhebhe@uniswa.sz

ABSTRACT

Every child is entitled to access quality early childhood education. Education services are meant to develop all individuals' cognitive capacities, though this may vary with individuals given their variable genetic make-up. Early childhood education is one way in which children are developed for the future. This study sought to establish the accessibility and equality in the provision of early childhood education services to children in the Kingdom of Eswatini, Manzini region. Open-ended interviews were the instruments used for data collection. Thematic analysis was the data analysis method used in this study. The study found that in the Kingdom of Eswatini in Manzini region, not all children of early childhood going age go to school due to limited finances, poverty, and sicknesses. The study concluded that there is no equality in the provision of early childhood education, as privately-owned early childhood development centers were meant for the few who could afford, as most parents could not afford the fees. The study also found that some parents were not aware of the value of early childhood education. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education formulates a policy that will compel all children to attend early childhood education to achieve their goal of providing equal and quality education to all children in the country. The government of the Kingdom of Eswatini should pronounce the value of early childhood education and start funding preschool education and also provide a documented national curriculum to ensure equality.

Keywords:

School; Early Childhood; Transition; Preschool; Education

ABSTRAK

Setiap anak berhak untuk mengakses pendidikan anak usia dini yang berkualitas. Layanan pendidikan dimaksudkan untuk mengembangkan kapasitas kognitif semua individu, meskipun hal ini mungkin berbeda dengan individu mengingat susunan genetiknya yang bervariasi. Pendidikan anak usia dini merupakan salah satu cara dimana anak tumbuh menjadi masa depan. Penelitian ini berupaya untuk

membangun aksesibilitas dan kesetaraan dalam penyediaan layanan pendidikan anak usia dini pada anak di Kerajaan Eswatini, wilayah Manzini. Wawancara terbuka adalah instrumen yang digunakan untuk pengumpulan data. Analisis tematik adalah metode analisis data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Studi tersebut menemukan bahwa di Kerajaan Eswatini di wilayah Manzini, tidak semua anak usia dini bersekolah karena keterbatasan keuangan, kemiskinan, dan penyakit. Studi tersebut menyimpulkan bahwa tidak ada kesetaraan dalam penyediaan pendidikan anak usia dini, karena pusat pengembangan anak usia dini milik swasta dimaksudkan untuk sedikit orang yang mampu, karena kebanyakan orang tua tidak mampu membayar biaya. Studi tersebut juga menemukan bahwa beberapa orang tua tidak menyadari nilai pendidikan anak usia dini. Studi tersebut merekomendasikan agar Kementerian Pendidikan merumuskan kebijakan yang akan memaksa semua anak untuk mengikuti pendidikan anak usia dini untuk mencapai tujuan mereka dalam memberikan pendidikan yang setara dan berkualitas kepada semua anak di negara ini. Pemerintah Kerajaan Eswatini harus mengumumkan nilai pendidikan anak usia dini dan mulai mendanai pendidikan prasekolah dan juga menyediakan kurikulum nasional yang terdokumentasi untuk memastikan kesetaraan.

Kata Kunci:

Sekolah; Anak Usia Dini; Transisi; Prasekolah; Pendidikan

1. Introduction

Early childhood education is an essential global intervention for child development. It was formally started as far back as the early 1500s, where the concept of educating children was attributed to Martin Luther (1483-1546) (Bonnay, 2017). The idea of educating children at an early age spread across to the countries globally. Africa, a continent that gained formal education through missionary work, became exposed to this evolving educational epistemology around the 20th century. Early Childhood Development has gained prominence the world over, including countries in Southern Africa, including the Kingdom of Eswatini.

Early childhood education is essential for child development and educational success for children. Accessing quality early childhood education is essential to all children globally, though various injustices in different nations result in inequalities to early childhood education (Archambault, Côté & Raynault, 2020). Access to quality early childhood education increases children's expectations by giving them opportunities to reach their full potential. It also increases the prospects that countries gain through the human capital needed to reduce inequalities and promote peaceful and wealthy societies (UNICEF, 2021).

Societies in the world need to promote in children equal opportunities for learning and enjoyment. In early childhood education, equality would refer to the importance of recognizing different individual needs and ensuring equity in terms of access, participation, and benefits for all

children and their families (Kildare County Childcare Committee, 2021). In early childhood education, girls and boys should not be separated in learning and development. Schools must provide children with proper and equal care and a feeling of security, and this must also be done on gender-equal terms (Heikkilä, 2020).

Early Childhood Education (ECE) services generally play a significant role in the development of all young children as they are set to offer education and care to children in their early years, and in the process facilitate the holistic development from birth to about age nine, in various areas of functioning (Child care, 2021). Smith (2019) suggests that young children deserve the best quality care and education because during the early years of their lives, a firm basis for learning and success in academic life is laid. Therefore, crucial that these young children have the opportunity to access quality early childhood education services (Eswatini National Curriculum Framework for General Education, 2018).

The Education Evaluation report (2015) also suggests that a successful early childhood education program helps to equip the children with well-being skills, communicating and exploring skills, and having a sense of belonging to fit well into their respective primary schools and achieve their maximum academically. In pursuance of the views on the provision of early childhood education services, this research study explored the accessibility and equality in the provision of the early childhood education program in Manzini region, in the Kingdom of Eswatini, for children falling within the zero to eight age cohort, of which seven to eight years of age include lower primary school years (Wabwoba, 2015).

Parents are mandated to help the young generation to navigate through their academic life successfully, thus, the need for every parent to partake in ensuring that children have access to early childhood education (Chen, 2020). According to the Education Evaluation report (2015), for the transition program to work best for the children, early childhood education leaders and primary school teachers should develop a good working relationship with one another, with the children, and with the parents. This will help the teachers to gain a clear picture of the child as a learner, for example, information about their strengths, interests, prior knowledge, and that information would help to bridge the children from familiar experiences to the ones they acquire in their learning (National Academy of Sciences, 2012). Findings from an NICHD Study of Early Childcare and Youth Development by Nokali, Bachman and Votruba-Drzal (2010), suggest that parent involvement in early childhood education saw a decline in problem behaviors and improvements in social skills and that those children with highly involved parents had enhanced social functioning and fewer behavior problems.

Early childhood education services vary significantly from one country to another, and there are no general formulas that can be given (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013). The Education Review Report of 2018 purports the notion of formalized learning at the early childhood education level as generally not compulsory in New Zealand, but most children get some form of early childhood

education, usually for 20-22 hours a week. The three and four-year-olds in New Zealand have the first 20 hours per week fully funded by the government. All children need to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills, especially in their last six months before transitioning to primary school. Bennet (2021) reveals that early childhood education services have become a norm and a responsibility of the parents, "...in many European and North American countries", as most parents spend more hours at work, children spend time in early childhood education centers.

Early childhood education in Kenya serves the critical purpose of preparing young children for primary education (Nganga, 2009). In a study by Nganga (2009), it is revealed that Kenya's government is minimally involved in supporting early childhood education. Therefore, parents are responsible for planning, developing, and managing the different early childhood education programs. Since Kenya's government introduced Free Primary education, many parents opted to enroll their children straight to primary school as they do not afford early childhood education fees, and the government does not sponsor it. The lack of government funding for the program has hindered access and equality in early childhood education services, limiting the population of the children who enroll in early childhood education centers. Approximately 35% of Kenya's children have access to early childhood education since most parents fail to afford the funds, and the government is not funding education at this level (UNESCO, 2015). Early childhood education is mostly funded through donations from local and international organizations such as the World Bank and UNICEF.

Another study done in Kenya reveals that quality early childhood care, whether in the home or an affordable care center, is essential for young children's health, safety, and cognitive development. The author also mentions that most of the primary schools in Kenya have an early childhood education department linked to them to improve improving children's academic achievements. Thus, nearly 75% of more than 50000 early childhood education centers in Kenya are linked to a primary school (Bouchane & Curtiss, 2016).

A study done in Botswana shows that the need to provide early childhood education is more compelling for both child development practitioners and academics (UNICEF Report, 2010). According to the UNICEF 2010/11 Situational Report of Botswana, the Education Act does not recognize the child's right to early education. Therefore, there is no standard curriculum nor set guidelines for monitoring teaching and learning at this level. This means that there is no equality in the content learned in an early childhood education as most children in Botswana start primary education with little or sometimes no experience of the school environment since early childhood education remains to be a privilege to children of the elite as parents pay the early childhood education fees. Since Botswana's government is minimally involved in providing this program, many young children are denied such opportunities, which might negatively affect academic life (Maundeni, 2013). Limited accessibility and equality to early childhood education adversely affect the teaching and learning process and students' academic performance at primary school as such, denied access leads to a lack of the desired foundation in education.

Maundeni (2013) observe that early childhood education programs facilitate children's psychological, psycho-social, nutritional, and health development of the children especially those who come from underprivileged groups or societies. The Early childhood education program also promotes language and physical effects and further promotes early stimulation, which is the early detection of children's learning difficulties and improving their performance academically (Bhebhe, Nkomo, & Vilakati, 2020).

Quality and relevance of education remain one of the priorities of education in the Kingdom of Eswatini for a long time (Magagula, 2015). In the past years, pre-primary education was not a prerequisite entry in the primary schools, and the government was not involved in ECCE issues and even a decade after the Education for All program was launched, the situation has not changed that much (Education Review report, 2015). In 2013, the Ministry of Education and training in collaboration with UNICEF, the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA), and the European Union started working on the articulation of the ECCE curriculum and the development of a competency-based curriculum for the basic educational level (Education review report, 2015). This shows that the program is slowly gaining recognition.

This study was framed around the conceptual framework for education quality in schools based on systems theory applied to education. This theory is significant for understanding any education system as systems consist of numerous fragmentary reforms to improve aspects of the education system (Barile & Polese, 2010). This theory is relevant to this study, as early childhood education is a fragment that starts the education of a child of which education significantly influences a person's life chances in terms of labor market success, preparation for autonomous citizenship, and general human flourishing (Liam, Newman, & Satz, 2017).

This theory derives its notion from science, where it is believed that a set of parts of a system interact to achieve specified objectives (Banathy & Jenlink, 2004; Wright, 2008). In achieving success in education, other factors like social class, race, and gender should be considered (Garira, 2020). Peragine & Biagi (2019) reveal that individuals in society need to have equal opportunities, irrespective of gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age, or sexual orientation. A child's social class influences equality and access to education.

In an education system, various education system levels, tertiary, school, and early childhood education, should work together to achieve systemic educational goals. This involves developing relevant policies for monitoring and evaluating equality to access education and determine whether the quality is being realized (Garira, 2020). In attaining equality access to education, policies may be put to place to ensure that all fragments in the system, personal or social circumstances such as gender, socio-economic status, migrant background, age, special needs, or place of residence, do not hinder equal access to education for all children from early years.

Currently, in the Manzini region of the Kingdom of Eswatini there is limited accessibility and no equality to early childhood education care services to most children in the country. A report from

the Ministry of Education and Training (2020) reveals that there are mainly private early childhood education centers that charge exorbitant funds to the extent that most children, especially those from low income and poor backgrounds, cannot afford early childhood education, meaning that children are denied their right to early childhood education. Thompson (2019) likens child care costs to buying a new brand Hyundai Elantra each year as parents spent more on education, toys, and games.

International documents and reports like European Commission (2011), European Parliament (2002) and Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman and Elder (2011) have reported a growing concern about accessibility of early childhood education for children from ethnic minority and low-income families. This concern is expressed along the line of reasonable access to high-quality early childhood education, meant to reduce early school leaving and counter poverty and social exclusion (Council of European Union, 2011).

The Early childhood education sub-sector receives little help from the government. Most children are excluded and have to start their primary education without proper skills that would enable them to cope well in the new environment with new experiences (Wabwoba, 2015). Some of the Early childhood education centers that exist within the country do not provide quality education for the children since no one is monitoring the curriculum offered at this level, thus imposing danger that the children. The support that the Early childhood education sub-sector receives from the government in the form of provision of inspectors to monitor the quality of education offered, training Early childhood education teachers, provision of teaching and learning materials but only to a selected few early childhood education centers (The Education Evaluation Report, 2015), therefore, the other centers operate as private entities with minimal monitoring. This study is then set to explore equality and accessibility to early childhood education centers in the Manzini region of the Kingdom of Eswatini.

The study objectives were to 1) Establish accessibility to early childhood education services to children in the Manzini region of the Kingdom of Eswatini, and 2) Determine how the early childhood education services may be equally made available to all children in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

2. Methods

Qualitative research was adopted in this study. Creswell (2014) reveals that qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning an individual or groups ascribed to a social problem. This approach proved to be perfect for the study as it is focused on accessibility to early childhood education for children from zero to eight years of age.

A case study research design was adopted in the study. Creswell (2014) defines a case study as how a researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals and can be either a single case or a case bounded by time and place. The researchers chose this design on the basis that a case study should be the problem, context, or issue. Therefore, provision for early childhood education is an issue that has recently gained popularity worldwide.

Three teachers were purposely selected from each school and for the purpose that they taught children in early childhood ages, and most of them were having at least three years of experience in the field of teaching. All the teachers chosen had a diploma in lower primary education, meaning that they were suitably trained to teach learners in their early years in primary schools.

Study participants were purposively chosen because they had relevant information since they were teaching children at the lower primary daily and were involved in assessing the fundamental skills children attained from the early childhood development centers.

Research instruments are measurement tools used or designed for obtaining data on a research topic. One of them is semi-structured interviews that describe as a qualitative inquiry method that combines a predetermined set of simple questions and open questions or questions that prompt more discussion, giving the interviewer more opportunities to explore themes or responses further. In this type of interview, the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewee (respondent) engage in a formal interview (Creswell, 2014). Keller and Conradin (2018) reveal that semi-structured interviews are best used when and where you would not get more than one chance of interviewing that individual. Using semi-structured interviews ensured good communication lines as the researchers had the opportunity to observe the participants' non-verbal language such as the facial expression, as they respond to the *questions*.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data collected through interviews. Creswell (2014) defines thematic analysis as a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in the research data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that it organizes and describes the data set in a rich, detailed form.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings obtained through the use of semi-structured interviews. The interviews' purposes were to ascertain teachers' views concerning the accessibility and equality of early childhood education. Three teachers from each of the selected five schools in the Manzini region of Eswatini were interviewed. The study reveals that the teachers interviewed were all qualified and that most of the teachers who took part in the study were females and there were few males. This suggested that early childhood education in schools is mainly provided by female teachers who had great experience handling young children as most of them had more than three years of teaching experience.

The data were collected, analyzed, and presented using themes that emerged from the study. Direct quotations were used to present some of the views from the respondents. The themes that emerged from the collected data were accessibility to early childhood education, quality control of early childhood centers and motives to equality issues in accessing early childhood education

3.1 Accessibility and Equality to Early Childhood Education

Teachers were interviewed to establish accessibility to early childhood education care centers in the Manzini region of Eswatini. Teacher 1 from school A stated that

"A few children early childhood education in this region, both boys and girls coming from families who can afford, those with low finances find it a challenge as fees are unaffordable."

Teacher 3 from school B also revealed that,

"There is limited accessibility to early childhood education, as there are few early childhood education centers that take both boys and girls but charge fees higher than what most parents can afford, meaning that not all children who go for grade one would have done early childhood education."

Similarly, teacher 2 from school C stated that,

"Compared to free primary school education, in this region, there is a minimal number of children, both genders, who access early childhood education, yet it is essential to the development of the child and future education."

The teachers who participated in the study believe that there was limited accessibility to early childhood education centers and that most of them were privately owned and expensive to most families in the region. Opportunities to early childhood education in the Manzini region of the Kingdom of Eswatini, were equally given to both genders, boys and girls, but a few could attend because of finances and lack of financial support from the government. The systems theory purports that the education sector has systems that contribute to improving aspects or parts of the education system (Barile & Polese, 2010). The financial system cripples equal access to early childhood education in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

3.2 Quality Control of Early Childhood Centers

Proper early childhood education centers are meant to benefit the child physically, socially, educationally, and psychologically meaning that the child is developed holistically (Berti, Cigala & Sharmahd, 2019). Teachers were asked to describe the quality control measures placed in the early childhood education centers to ensure the holistic development of a child. Teacher 2 from school B stated that,

"Inspectors are instituted to monitor the quality of early childhood education offered in the service centers, but to a selected few that the government is using to pilot, leaving the other private centers to operate as private entities with minimal monitoring."

The response from Teacher 2 from school B is similar to the implications from The Education Evaluation Report (2015) that plans are in place to monitor implementation to ensure children's holistic growth and development. However, there was a challenge in ensuring that all early childhood education centers adhere to the Ministries requirements since most of them are not registered with the ministry making it challenging to reach them and monitor. Teacher 1 from school C stated that,

“Although early childhood education is a good base mind opener for children in rural areas, those who own early childhood education care centers take early childhood education as a money-making business. There, minimal monitoring of the curriculum given to learners as the government has little say on where they do not support.”

This same notion came from The Education Review Report of (2018) and Nganga (2009) who revealed that even in countries like Botswana and Kenya, early childhood education was not supported by the government, meaning that there were no fees subsidies in their early childhood education care centres, hence the government had no say in what was contained in the curriculum. On the same note, Teacher 3 from school B pointed out that,

“As long as there is no documented curriculum that will be used to train the children we are just wasting our money for nothing since most of these centers have untrained educators and children do not get the skills they are supposed to get.”

This reveals that in rural areas, some early childhood education centres, though accessible to a few who can afford, the quality of education provided in the centres may not be up to standard as there is limited quality control of the curriculum implemented and how it is implemented. This is contrary to the view posed by Eswatini National Curriculum Framework for General Education (2018) that it is crucial for the young children to have an opportunity to access quality early childhood education services. Similarly, Teacher 2 from school C supported the notion by revealing that:

“The Ministry of Education does limited monitoring on their operations such that many children who claimed to have attended early childhood education start their primary education without the proper skills even though they would have fully attended their classes support.”

The finding that even those learners who attend early childhood education may not acquire the desired skills because of limited monitoring systems placed by the education system of the country is contrary to views from Education Evaluation report (2015) states that a successful early childhood education programme helps in equipping the children with wellbeing, communication and exploration skills that make them fit well into their respective primary schools, ensuring that they achieve to their maximum academically. The systems theory purports that there should be systems like relevant policies for monitoring and evaluating equality to access education as well as quality (Garira, 2020).

3.3 Motives to Equality Issues in Accessing Early Childhood Education

When teachers were asked to state the possible reasons why some children do not attend early childhood education, all the teachers concurred that limited funding, negligence, poverty, and sickness contributed to unequal access to early childhood education. Only those who could afford fees in private early childhood centers managed to go to school. This finding is in line with the view from Nganga (2009), who noted that early childhood education in Kenya was not sponsored by the government, but the Kenyan government had instituted Free Primary education, due to poverty, many parents chose to enroll their children straight to primary school as they could not afford early childhood education fees.

Through an interview conducted noted that there was no equal access to early childhood education as almost all the early childhood education centers found in the country were privately owned and expensive to the extent that parents could not afford them. In school E, Teacher 2 highlighted that,

“Early childhood education services are too expensive for parents to afford since the private owners charged exorbitant fees and offered their self-designed curriculum and marginal resources, keeping most of the money to themselves.”

This view is similar to the ideas from Thompson (2019), who posits that child care and education are costly and the Ministry of Education and Training (2020) reveals that privately-owned early childhood centers are not aligned to the government sponsor and control. Thus, they are very expensive to most parents. Teacher 2 from school E pointed out that,

“Most of the Eswatini citizens are low-income earners so they cannot afford early childhood education fees and bus fares as some find good early childhood education centers far from their homes.”

In line with this view O'Neill (2021) revealed that in 2020, the estimated unemployment rate in Swaziland was at approximately 21.97 percent, and in 2021 it is 22.8 percent, meaning that the unemployment rate is growing with the inaccessibility to early childhood education.

The study unveiled that those parents that are working do not have time to accompany their children to early childhood education centers and some children missed this precious opportunity. This finding is contrary to the views of Bennet (2021), who points out that early childhood education services have become a custom and an obligation of every parent. Teacher 2 from school E stated that:

“Even though some parents have the wish to send them to good ECE centers but they are too far away to be accessed by young children; hence they opt to keep their children at home and the fees needed are high, so they cannot afford since funds are not enough even to provide the other basic needs.”

The distance from home to the early childhood development centers was also revealed as a hindrance to accessing ECE. Wabwoba (2015) revealed that in some cases, early childhood education could be more expensive in terms of fees and transport than hiring a nanny or asking a relative to take care of the child while the parents are at work. Similarly, Teacher 1 from school D concurred that:

“In most families, find that only one member is working and his/her earning is not enough to support all the basic needs of the family thus they opt for children waiting until they are ready to start Grade 1 since there is free primary school education, while in early childhood education centres, they pay and it is expensive.”

This study revealed that most ECE centers in the Kingdom of Eswatini are privately owned such that they are too expensive to be afforded by low-income families. This view was also supported by a study done by Garcia (2017), who viewed that early childhood education does not come cheap. Likewise, Teacher 3 from school D also highlighted that

“Even though some can afford to pay the school fees, conversely, the good early childhood education centers are far from their homes, and they cannot afford to pay the fees and the bus fees at the same time. Therefore, children end up missing the ECE.”

The study findings also reflected that, among others, poverty and sickness are reasons why parents fail to send their children to early childhood education. The views presented are contrary to ideas from Chen (2020), who suggests that parents are supposed to help the children succeed in their academic life by ensuring that children attend early childhood education. Teacher 1 from school E suggested that:

“Poverty and diseases are the primary reasons why parents fail to send their children to ECE. Due to the HIV epidemic, most children live either with a sick family member or in child-headed or single-headed families. Thus, they cannot afford to pay the fees as they are high.”

Due to diseases, most children nowadays come from child-headed and single-parent-headed families. Thus they cannot afford to pay early childhood education fees since they are expensive, yet there is also a need to take care of a sick relative and provide food for the family. The findings revealed that schools have children who have missed early childhood education due to sick relatives' expenses due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Garcia, 2017). Teacher 1 from school D, added that

“Negligence and lack of knowledge about the importance of ECE also make some parents fail to send their children to early childhood education.”

It is revealed that those parents who lack knowledge on the importance of sending children for early childhood education would not send their children to school. Teacher 2 from school B agrees

with Teacher 3 from school D that since early childhood education centers are expensive, primary education is free. Thus, parents find no reason to pay for school fees in early childhood education centers.

4. Conclusions

This study concluded that every child, boy or girl, in the Manzini region of Eswatini was given an equal opportunity to access early childhood education. However, children attending early childhood education were few due to limited financial support from unemployed and low-income earning parents and guardians as well as lack of government sponsorship. The study also concluded that some parents were not aware of the importance of early childhood education, so they sent their children straight from home to grade one. There was no equal access to early childhood education. Early childhood education in the Kingdom of Eswatini is as if it was meant for the few who could afford fees to privately owned early childhood education centers. The government in the Kingdom of Eswatini offers Free Primary Education (FPE), those parents who do not work or those who do not afford fees, do not send children to the expensive early childhood education centers, they assume that the children will catch up at primary school where is free.

Inaccessibility to early childhood education was also contributed by parents who lacked knowledge of the importance of early schooling and would not send them to school. Poverty and sicknesses were also identified as factors hindering equal access to early childhood education services. Accessibility to early childhood education was also hindered by the outbreaks of pandemics in the world which saw most children live in child-headed and single-parent-headed families that struggle to put food on the table. Thus, sending young children to early childhood education centers was impossible as early childhood education is expensive.

The recommendations in this study were set according to the findings of the study. This study recommends that the Ministry of Education formulates policies that would highlight early childhood education as an essential and compulsory service to promote equal access to education for young children. It is recommended that campaigns be made to educate parents on the importance of early childhood education to provide for the children to have access to school in their early years. The study also recommends that good early childhood education centers be built and be well equipped in all communities in the Kingdom of Eswatini, to ensure equal access to early childhood services for every child. It is a recommendation in this study that subsidies be offered to early childhood education centers to ensure that they are affordable to every child in the community. The Ministry of Education has the responsibility to ensure that there is an appropriate curriculum set for early childhood education.

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