

This thesis investigates the factors that influence the quality and relevance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Kenya. The research problem has a basis in the growing concern among Kenyan pre-school education practitioners that the current approach to ECE that emphasizes the academic component at the expense of other areas of development may be curtailing the provision of quality and relevant experiences to young children. The over emphasis on cognitive development observed goes against child development research findings that define quality and relevant ECE to be that which caters for the total development of the child and encompasses education, care, health and nutrition activities. Yet, no comprehensive study had been done in Kenya to establish the interrelationships that exist between factors that influence quality and relevance in ECE. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to isolate and interrelate factors that impacted on the quality and relevance of ECE, in Kenyan pre-schools in view of the fact that the experiences provided during early years are critical because they form a basis for future educational development. The study employed the deductive approach by not only first critically examining the factors identified by the Literature review but going further to isolate more related factors. To adequately achieve the objectives of the study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis were used. Specifically, the multiple case study method was used to purposively select 26 sample schools in Nairobi and Machakos Districts. The process of data collection and analysis was facilitated by the use of a variety of methods including key informant interviews; Focused group discussions, document analysis and classroom observations. The sample included a wide range of informants involved is the ECE sector.

Information obtained from the emergent themes of the study was used to crystallize various interrelated factors that impacted on the quality and relevance of ECE provided in the sample schools. Critical among these was the inadequate government policy framework on ECE. This scenario was as a result of the exclusion of ECE from the Education Act thus, rendering it not official and thus not a priority area for government funding. This situation, apart from making it difficult for the government to reinforce the set standards it also encouraged alternative sponsors to the sector based on informal government policy of cost sharing and partnership. The study further established that quality and relevance of ECE was also mainly affected by parent expectations of pre-schools, the competitive examination oriented examination system and formal test based primary standard one admission practices. The study further observed that the quality and relevance of ECE was further affected by historical factors, inadequate state of state of equipment, learning materials and supervision, the care of under threes and children with special needs, poor terms and conditions of service and motivation of pre-school teachers and lack of co-ordination and linkage between ECE provision partners. However, the study also deciphered good pre-school practices including the use of friendly learning atmosphere and locally available materials that enhanced quality and relevance. To address the emergent issues on quality and relevance of ECE in Kenya, the study made suggestions that addressed the ECE stakeholders including policy makers, parents, teachers and officers. These recommendations, including those on areas for further research, center around improving the status of ECE both in terms of policy and funding and sensitizing parents on its specialized role.