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A Critical Analysis of Child-Related Policies in Relation to their Implementation in Public Schools in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study analysed child-related policies in relation to their implementation in public schools in Zimbabwe, with focus on selected public primary schools in Harare. A phenomenological hermeneutic research philosophy and a qualitative research approach were used to underpin the conduct of this study. The study used a sample of 50 participants comprising 5 public primary school heads, 5 teachers and 40 primary school children. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from school heads and teachers while focus groups were used to collect data from school children. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed to analyse data. Findings show that there was weak policy implementation in the participating public schools. The policies were too many for effective implementation. As a result, the majority of the policies were being overlooked by school heads, teachers and other major stakeholders. Based on key findings, this study recommended the streamlining of child-related policies for effective implementation. Furthermore, all stakeholders should be involved in the formulation and development of child-related policies in order to enhance effectiveness at the implementation stage.

Keywords: Policy, Child-Related Policies, Implementation, Policy Implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Bullock & Lavis (2019) policy implementation is a sequence of actions carried out by the central government and other stakeholders to accomplish aims and objectives expressed in policy documents. Mlahleki (2005) cited in Ncube *et al.* (2014) clarified that in undertaking policy implementation, there is need for people who explain the aims, objectives and goals of the policy so that the policy is understood by all stakeholders. Likewise, Mlahleki (2005: 1; Ncube *et al.*, 2014) say, "implementation of policy simply means that the aims, objectives and goals should be achievable when put into action." Arguing from an educational perspective, Moyo (1992); Ncube (2014); & Ringson (2017) concurred that confrontation is certain when educators feel threatened when educational policies are developed and implemented without their contribution. Thus, the significance of custody and sense of ownership of policies by all stakeholders is vital for their successful implementation. This paper analysed the implementation of child-related educational policies in Harare of Zimbabwe. The focus was on public primary schools which were drawn from three educational districts in Harare namely; Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara.

Background

In general, numerous nations, including Zimbabwe, have established a variety of policies influenced by international and regional institutions.

Buse *et al.* (2005) claim that there are many ways to interpret the term "policy," making it challenging to define. However, Van Mieghem, Verschueren *et al.* (2020) defined policy as a "broad statements of goals, objectives and means by a group of decision makers who create a framework for activity. Other scholars conceptualise policy as a series of practices, statements, regulations and laws resulting from decisions on how things should be done (Cushing, 2021; Hayab & Ogunode, 2021; & Barker, 2006). Malawian Government (2008) defines policy as a decision taken by the government to guide and translate aspirations into actions. In this study, policies were as tools that guide the provision of quality education in an environment that is conducive for children's learning and growth. Apart from content, educational policies spell out the obligations and roles of key stakeholders in the education system. While policies that relate to the education of children are made at various levels and by numerous interest groups, this study focused on international legal frameworks for children's rights, regional instruments, and government policies.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), World Symposium on Education for All in Jomtien (1990), World Education Forum (2000) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015), serve as benchmarks for other child-related policies that are aimed at protecting children as well as ensuring that they access quality education in public schools (Fauziati, 2018). In the

same manner, Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal number 4, compels nations to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning.” This goal affords all children the right to access quality education regardless of their status (UN Report, 2017). Nevertheless, Masuka, *et al.* (2012), submit that these international and regional declarations do not automatically form part of law unless approved by parliament or incorporated into the law by an Act of Parliament. Each nation, including Zimbabwe is required to ratify the international instruments and incorporate them into their domestic laws for subsequent implementation within their educational systems. In this regard, Ringson (2017) in his study conducted in Gutu District of Masvingo, established that the Zimbabwe Government has made significant progress in the development of child-friendly policies in line with international norms and aspirations. The progress made so far was driven by the Children’s Act of 2001, which stipulates that children who orphaned and those with parents who are not in a position to care for them, are the responsibility of the government (Chinyenze, 2018). In this regard, the Children’s Act is one of the most important pieces of legislation that provides for protection, adoption and safekeeping of every child in Zimbabwe (Ringson, 2017). This Act is complemented by the Education Act (2006; 2013; 2020), which was established to address children’s issues, and particularly specifies that every child is expected to have access to primary education (Chinyenze, 2018).

Education is accepted as a human right since the adoption of the universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 alongside health and shelter. Since then, more than 150 governments have adopted the declaration for Education for All policy in support of the universal right for education (Madani, 2019). In the case of Zimbabwe, it was apparent that the Education for All policy, Inclusive Education Policy, and National Orphan Care Policy were some of the key laws, regulations, and frameworks that the government employs to support children. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2015) contends that while Zimbabwe’s child-related legislation and policies seem to be sound, their effective implementation is the key to ensuring that the intended beneficiaries benefit from them. Regrettably, Ringson (2017) found that difficulties stemming from socioeconomic challenges that antagonised Zimbabwe in the past two decades undermined implementation of the various policies meant to benefit the children in primary school education. However, despite the prevalence of these challenges, ACERWC (2015) reported that there were various Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other development partners that helped to alleviate the challenges facing Zimbabwe’s children within the existing legislative framework that guided support of distressed children in primary school education system. Notwithstanding

these mitigatory measures, Maunganidze and Kasayira (2012) found that there were many gaps in the policy framework that support vulnerable children in primary school education in Zimbabwe. The same observation was echoed by Bhaiseni (2016); & Ringson (2017), who noted that the gaps in the various Acts of Parliament that deals with child-related policies contributed to the prevalence of inadequate support suffered by vulnerable primary school going children in Zimbabwe. In support of this view, Chizororo (2018) argued that the gaps in child-related policies in Zimbabwe was in fact a clear demonstration of lack of political commitment as well as negative interference in the implementation of existing policies by politicians.

Research Question

This study conducted a critical analysis of child-related policies in relation to their implementation in public schools in Zimbabwe. The focus was on selected public primary schools in Harare. In particular, the participating primary schools were drawn from Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara Districts. Consequently, the main research question was “What hampers the implementation of child-related policies in public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe?”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, whose ideas are relevant in the informing the development and implementation of policy frameworks in public primary schools in Zimbabwe. The core of the Ecological Systems Theory is that the environment plays a critical role in every person’s development. In selecting this guiding theory, it was considered that Bronfenbrenner’s five nested ecological sub-systems; microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem, better explain the developmental realities experienced by children in primary schools (Guy-Evans, 2020; Donald *et al.*, 2010; Chinhara, 2016). Of particular relevance to this study was the macrosystem, which comprised the wider structure inclusive of the cultural, political, policies, legislation, belief system, norms, values, social programmes and material support that strongly impact the development of children. Similarly, national international policies including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Dawes & Donald, 2004; Chinyenze, 2018; & Fauziati, 2018), not only form part of the macrosystem of children in primary schools but have profound impact on their development.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a phenomenological hermeneutic research philosophy to explore the challenges that hampered the implementation of child-

related policies in public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe. This philosophy was chosen on the strength that it was considered the most suitable for this study which sought to understand the studied phenomenon from the perspective of those who were affected by the investigated problem. In deciding to adopt a phenomenological research philosophy, it was also considered that it was widely used in similar studies and endorsed by numerous researchers including Husserl (1970); Van Manen (1990); Reiners (2012); Vagle (2018); & Ringson (2020) among many others. These researchers concur that as a research philosophy, phenomenology offers a platform from which a researcher could explore and analyse the studied phenomena from the angle of natural lived experiences of research participants. The study employed a qualitative research approach to complement the adopted guiding research philosophy (Hewlett, 2013; Marrian, 2009; & Ringson, 2020). Merriam (2009:25) explained that a qualitative research approach seeks to understand real problems that affect people in their everyday lives. Hence, it is regarded as the most appropriate research approach when studying people's lived experiences. In the same regard, this study sought to find out views, experiences, feelings and perceptions of school heads, teachers and school children regarding the implementation of child related policies in public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe. Thus, the participants' worldviews were used to analyse the implementation of child-related policies in public primary schools in Harare of Zimbabwe.

The study focused on public primary schools selected from three educational districts in Harare of Zimbabwe. The participating districts were Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara, from which five public primary schools participated in this study. A sample of 50 participants comprising 5 school heads, 5 teachers and 40 school children were selected using a purposive sampling technique. According to Creswell (2014) purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants for their ability to provide the data required to address the research question. All the necessary permissions to conduct this study were obtained prior to data gathering. First, institutional permission to conduct this study was obtained from Women's University in Africa's Ethics Committee. This was followed by another permission from the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. Other ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality information, privacy and integrity among others, were observed. The study administered in-depth interviews to the 5 school heads and 5 teachers while a focus group data collection method was administered to 40 primary school children. The selected participants provided rich information which enabled this study to realise its objectives. Data were analysed using thematic data analysis procedures.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Analysis of data revealed that there were numerous child-related policies in Zimbabwe that supported the education of children in primary schools. However, overwhelming data showed that not all of these policies were implemented due to numerous reasons chief of which was related policy gaps, lack of political will as well as interference from politicians. Responding to questions about the implementation of child-related policies in public primary schools, the majority of the school heads and teachers who participated in this study acknowledged that some policies, such as the Education for All Policy, Education Act Policy Non-Formal Education Policy, and Inclusive Education Policy, were relatively being implemented in public primary schools in Zimbabwe. One of the participants, a school head, remarked that the enrollment of all students in schools, regardless of their circumstances, was an indication that child-related policies that regulate the education of children in primary schools were being implemented for the benefit of the children. This participant was adamant that;

Schools are implementing education policies by the fact that all children are being enrolled in schools regardless of their status. We have a supervision policy to check whether effective teaching-learning is taking place in our classes (School Head 1).

However, the majority of those interviewed thought that policy implementation in public primary schools presented challenges due to the multiplicity of the policies. The participants indicated that as a result of this challenge, some of the policies were knowingly and sometimes unknowingly overlooked by those who are supposed to implement them. In this regard, it was evident that implementation of child-related policies that are meant to support children in public primary schools in Epworth, Mabvuku and Tafara districts, was generally weak. This assessment was buttressed by participants who exposed that they were not quite aware of some of the child-related policies as they are not involved in their formulation and development.

All the 5 teachers who participated in the interviews shared their experiences on the studied phenomenon. They concurred that policy implementation in public primary schools in their districts was problematic mainly due to lack of resources. Participants highlighted that while various policies that are designed to support the education of children in public primary schools existed, lack of resources was the biggest challenge that hinder their implementation. According to these participants, resources such as financial, human and other necessary educational materials were not provided and this was negatively affecting the quality of education in schools as teachers could not fully implement what was expected of them. This view by the teachers aligned with the assessment of school children who participated

in focus group discussion. They revealed that while the education policy prohibited the sending away from school for non-payment of school fees, school heads and School Development Committees were in the habit of disregarding this policy. A focus group participant stated that;

We are sometimes asked to go back home for non-payment of school fees by the School Head and School Development Committee members (FGD-2 participant).

Justifying the sending away of children from school for non-payment of school fees, one of the teachers who participated in this study unyieldingly stressed that;

Due to lack of resources, we are unable to totally implement policies as we are expected to. We have limited teaching-learning materials and other resources required to run a school. We cannot afford accepting learners who have not paid school fees, we have to send them back home until they pay their fees (Participant Teacher 3).

Vulnerable children were always sent back home for not paying school fees within the stipulated time. Sending children back home for not paying school fees was actually against government policy which outlawed this practice. The practice was also a violation of Article (28) of the UNCRC, which compels member states to provide for free and compulsory primary education.

The study noted that school uniforms are part of major requirements for all learners. School heads revealed that there was a policy which encouraged all learners to be in uniforms. However, according to participants, this policy was difficult to implement since most of the school children were from very poor families. However, the study established that some of the school children from poor backgrounds were being allowed to be in classes without complete uniforms. These unfortunate children were psychologically and emotionally affected leading to loss of self-esteem and eventually to poor academic performance. One of the participating school head explained why they knowingly violated the uniform policy in their school.

It is a policy requirement that each learner should be in a complete school uniform. However, it is difficult to implement this policy since most of the school children come from very poor families and they cannot afford to buy complete uniforms as required by the primary school policy of uniforms. We disregard this policy because the government who is supposed to help these children is not forthcoming with the funds (School Head 4).

Another school head clarified that;

Although every child is expected to be in complete school uniform, sometimes we just ignore this policy to accommodate vulnerable learners from families that cannot afford uniforms. The government is also violating this policy because it is its responsibility to cater for these vulnerable groups by paying their fees and buying uniforms. Otherwise, these underprivileged children are stigmatised by their peers for coming to school without uniforms or with tattered school uniforms (School head 2).

The above sentiment by one of the participants aligns with recent findings by Tsheko (2017), whose study in Botswana established that orphans and vulnerable children in schools lack basic requirements needed for their education including school uniforms. In addition, Seruwagi (2013) in Uganda & Datta (2009) in Kenya revealed that family poverty has negative impact on the education of the concerned children. Most poor families were failing to cover the cost of school requirements. A study conducted by Dekeza (2018), confirmed that vulnerable children face challenges of lack of school uniforms and that this problem affected their educational performance. The thinking is that lack of school uniforms by some students in the midst peers who have uniforms, create stigma, generate a sense of inadequacy and discrimination, resulting in low self-esteem and poor academic performance.

Given this problem, public primary schools could alleviate this problem if the Government through the responsible Ministries, implement the various child-related policies that are meant to support vulnerable children so that they could access educational needs as provided by various policy frameworks. While other stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations (churches) and individuals, were helping some children by way of paying their school fees and providing supporting educational requirements, the primary responsibility lies with the government. Existing policies designed for this purpose could address this problem if they are implemented in their fulness.

The analysis also revealed that some participants were not conversant with some crucial international, regional and national policies and instruments that are meant to support the education of children in primary schools. The majority of the participants knowledge about the provisions of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) (1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (1995) and Children's Act (2001), was scanty. Participants were also not eloquent about other policies that support the wellbeing of primary school going children who needed to the protection of policies in order to alleviate

their vulnerabilities. Such laws and legal frameworks included the Domestic Violence Act (2006) which protects children from abuse, the Public Health Act (1996) which provided for free medical assistance for all children, National Orphan Care Policy (1999) which provided for the provision of basic care and protection for orphans and vulnerable children among a host of other child-related policies. One of the participants had this to say about their scanty knowledge about these policies;

I have heard about policies that are meant to protect orphans and vulnerable children but they were never taught to us during our training at college. I only conversant with policies such as the Education Act, Non-Formal Education and Policy Inclusive Education Policy, which promotes education for all children in Zimbabwe (School head 5).

Another participant also disclosed her ignorance of the various international and regional laws that relates to children. She divulged that;

I do not have any knowledge on child-related policies because I did not receive any education on them (Teacher 3).

The findings established that generally, policies in Zimbabwean education sector are imposed by government through its ministry of primary and secondary education. As the key stakeholders and implementers of the various policies that support the education of children in public primary schools, the involvement in policy formulation and development by school heads and teachers was rare if ever it happens. As a result, some of the existing policies were not implemented due to lack of knowledge and sometimes due to lack of commitment on the part of government itself. Consequently, the analysis of data demonstrates that implementation of child-related policies that are meant to support the education of children in public primary schools was weak. The problem of weak policy implementation has contributed towards the various challenges that vulnerable children of primary school going age face despite the presence of numerous legal frameworks that were designed to protect them, based on this key finding, it was apparent that the involvement of all stakeholders in the formulation and development of streamlined and easy to implement child-related policies could be the panacea to the existing problem faced by vulnerable children in public primary schools in Zimbabwe and beyond.

CONCLUSION

There were too many child-related policies that seek to support the education of vulnerable children in public primary schools in Harare in particular and Zimbabwe in general. The multiplicity of these child-related policies made it difficult for effective implementation. As a result, some public primary schools in the participating districts of Epworth,

Mabvuku and Tafara were in the practice of deliberating overlooking some of the policies for one reason or another. This practice was weakening the policy framework that was meant to support the concerned children who required such care. Therefore, this study concluded that streamlining the policy framework could produce robust but manageable child-related policies that could be implemented effectively by all public primary schools for the benefit of the intended children in need of support. The discussion also revealed that policies that the formulation and development of policies that affect public primary schools was the preserve of the non-school based Ministry of Education officials. School heads and teachers who are eventual implementers because their position as the foot soldiers in the educational system, are excluded in the process. As a result, they lack not only intimate knowledge of the various applicable policies but they also lack a sense of ownership of policies that imposed on them to implement. This could be the reason why some policies that are meant to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable children in public primary schools were not implemented for the benefit of these affected children. In this regard, the study concluded that school heads and teachers should be involved in the formulation and development of all policies that relates to the support of children in public primary schools. Last but not least, it was apparent that the majority of participating school heads and teachers were not conversant with regional and international provisions that support that education of primary school children including those who suffer certain vulnerabilities. Based on this finding, this study concluded that existing policy framework that relate to primary school education should be taught as a module at teacher training colleges in order to capacitate all educators with critical knowledge about the policy frameworks that apply in their practice. The study further concluded that school heads and already practicing teachers should be empowered with the knowledge of policies that apply in their jurisdiction through seminars conducted by their responsible Ministry.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the study recommends that:

- The government should streamline the numerous policies that are meant to support the education of children in public primary schools in Zimbabwe in order to enhance their effectiveness and ease of implementation.
- School heads and teachers should be involved in the formulation and development of child-related policies for subsequent easy of implementation.
- Policies that are meant to support the education of children in public primary schools should be taught at teacher training colleges as a module to capacitate all educators with relevant policy framework knowledge.

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should run regular seminars to empower school heads and already practicing teachers with knowledge about child-related policies that apply in public primary schools.

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