

Original Article

# Challenges in Early Childhood Care and Education during the Era of Covid-19: Insights from ECCE Stakeholders for Preschools in selected Rural Areas – Botswana

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**Abstract** - Global pandemics, such as COVID-19, tend to affect different sectors, and the education sector in Botswana has not been spared from the effects. While all levels and types of education are facing serious challenges, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector is one of the most vulnerable sectors and is prone to have a bigger impact given that more than 95% of ECCE centers for children below five years in the country are privately funded and operated. Based on a qualitative study of experiences of ECCE providers in selected preschools in two villages situated in the Kweneng and Kgatleng districts of Botswana, the paper discusses challenges encountered by the ECCE centers during COVID-19 as well as the coping strategies that were used at that time. Some of the challenges that respondents reported included: the temporary shutdown of the school; declining enrolment; sporadic school fee payments; staff's fears of infection, limited essential supplies; limited opportunities to meet parents physically maintaining sanitary environments, and children's inability to wear masks properly. Several coping mechanisms were used, but most of them were ineffective. The paper concludes by discussing implications for practice and policy.

**Keywords** - Curriculum, Early childhood education, Health and safety, Pandemic, Policy.

## 1. Introduction

Public-centered Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a new development in Botswana because, for a long time, ECCE has been operated by non-governmental organizations such as churches, private individuals and institutions (Maundeni, 2013). Only about eight years ago, the government of Botswana started to provide ECCE (specifically pre-primary classes) in public schools. Similar to other educational sectors of the country, the ECCE sector was also affected by COVID-19 to a larger extent. Some of the effects of Covid-19 that directly impact the education sector include diminished health status and quality of life, reduced income generation among families, and the need to readjust teaching and learning methods (Jalongo, 2021).

Covid-19 was first found to be prevalent in Wuhan-China in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) later declared it a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Since the pandemic outbreak, people's livelihoods, health systems, food systems and education systems worldwide have been disrupted (UNESCO, n.d.)

After declaring Covid-19 as a pandemic, WHO mandated all countries to follow Covid-19 health protocols, including social distancing, washing and sanitizing hands, and wearing masks. Countries all over the world also imposed lockdowns and frequent closures of schools in response to the pandemic. As Vasileva, Alisic and De Young (2021) observed, the Covid-19 pandemic and related responses, such as lockdowns, isolation and disruption of ECCE services, have impacted the lives of children and their families all around the globe.

While all levels of education were significantly affected by the pandemic, ECCE, unlike other levels of education, has not been given adequate attention in discussions and responses. Yet, it is one of the most vulnerable sectors and prone to have a worse impact, especially since a large percentage of ECCE settings are privately funded and operated. This is evident in the recent UNICEF data review from 100 countries (UNICEF, 2020). To analyze the impact of Covid-19 in similar settings, this paper seeks to highlight challenges encountered by some ECCE centers (preschools) in one village in Botswana.



## 2. Literature Review

The pandemic impacted all early childhood education's key stakeholders (teachers, children and parents included). The crisis challenged countries to become more innovative in terms of offering education to all cadres of learning, including early childhood education. Thus COVID-19 motivated early childhood service providers and educators to improve their competency in using information, communication and technology services to enhance the provision of education during pandemics (Malta, Campos & Vieira 2021). UNESCO (2020) reported that more than 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries had their educational activities interrupted. This number includes statistics of preschool learners globally, Botswana included. Preschool children are a very special group because they depend on adults for almost every need.

Given that the pandemic has a global impact, Pattnaik and Jalongo (2021) emphasise the need for an inclusive approach to tackling the consequences of COVID-19 on the education and learning of children. Hence the relevance of this article as it explores the challenges in early childhood care and education in the context of rural Botswana during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rural areas are less resourced compared to urban areas and are usually overlooked in research; therefore, it is important to explore the challenges experienced by ECCE stakeholders in these areas to ensure the inclusivity of the needs of vulnerable children.

The pandemic also challenged the service providers' readiness to respond to and uphold children's rights to education and learning in times of crisis globally. The pandemic has also helped communities appreciate that access to early childhood education provides children's educational needs and offers a safe place for children to be protected from abuse in their homes. For example, a research study conducted on an Island in the Pacific by Dayal and Tiko (2020) revealed that teachers were not only concerned about their health and the possibility of losing their jobs, but they were also fretful about their pupils' exposure to abuse in their homes, more especially those residing in single-parent families and under the care of their guardians. Some of the innovative ways implemented during COVID-19 included introducing ICT and hand-delivering printed learning materials to pupils who did not have access to ICT (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Given that many early childhood preschools in rural Botswana do not have ICT access and have fewer students, hand-delivering printed learning materials in the homes can be a viable method of enhancing students' learning during pandemics such as COVID-19. ICT is crucial as it helps learners, parents and teachers connect with each other easily and provides continuity of learning that assists young children in having emotional stability and wellness (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Alan (2021) has also emphasized that continuing learning opportunities for early childhood pupils

is important for their psychological well-being. According to Alan (2021), homeschooling and ICT require both parent preparedness and teacher preparedness; hence, the service needs to develop and implement user-friendly action plans so that the educational needs of children are not compromised.

The educational gaps and other needs of young children have not been exposed to COVID-19 because the literature (Black et al., 2020; Save the Children, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020) indicates that children under the age of five face developmental challenges as a result of limited access to educational needs. For example, from a global perspective, 43% of children below five years were estimated to fail to achieve their developmental abilities (Black et al., 2020), while 9.7 million young girls were unlikely to resume their schooling after the pandemic ( Save the Children, 2020). The World Bank (2021) cautioned that since COVID-19 has escalated inequalities globally, vulnerable groups such as young girls from low-income families, children with disabilities and ethnic minorities were more likely to have difficulties accessing educational services than other groups. Therefore in the context of Botswana, it will not be surprising for early childhood preschools in rural areas where resources are scarce to struggle to open schools or offer ICT services during and after the post-COVID-19 pandemic than in urban areas.

During times of human crisis, communities and service providers pay close attention to the needs of vulnerable children to ensure that decisions taken do not deny them their rights as stipulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children (OMEP, 2020). For example, Mlilo (2020) and Ramabu (2020) indicated that sexual violation of girls and young women escalated in Botswana during COVID-19, and that calls for a holistic response to early childhood students' needs. While it is important to offer ICT services and home learning during pandemics, preschool service providers and communities must devise the means and strategies to protect children from abuse in their homes during pandemics with restricted movements such as COVID-19.

## 3. Materials and Methods

This paper is based on insights from a focus group discussion (FGD) with some preschool owners and in-depth interviews with 10 teachers of preschools in two villages that are next to Gaborone (one in Kweneng and the other one in the Kgatleng district). The preschool owners participating in the focus group discussion were part of the committee responsible for organising an empowerment workshop for owners of preschools in and around Gaborone in April 2022. The preschool owners and the teachers were purposively selected based on their experience managing preschools and work experience, respectively. Given the diverse and multifaceted challenges preschools faced in the initial era of

Covid-19, members of the above-mentioned group requested some volunteers to form an organising committee to spearhead an empowerment workshop. Teachers who participated in the interviews were derived from three schools in the two villages. Permission to interview the teachers was sought from the owners of the preschools. The discussions focused specifically on challenges that ECCE centres faced and how they coped.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Challenges

#### 4.1.1. Temporary Shutdowns and Associated Challenges

Botswana experienced several lockdowns as a result of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020. After three months, some relaxation of lockdown measures occurred in June 2020, and preschools were allowed to reopen in August 2020, but the attendance was less than half compared to 2019.

#### 4.1.2. Financial Constraints

All owners of preschools highlighted that one of the major challenges they faced was abrupt and temporary shutdowns. The shutdowns had enormous financial implications for the schools. They alluded to the fact that the preschools they operated are already charging low school fees (compared to their counterparts in Gaborone); as such, the lockdowns affected the ability of schools to pay teachers and pay for other things. The lockdowns hardest hit owners who operated from rented premises. The preschool owners reported that parents (including those already owing school fees) stopped paying school fees immediately when the lockdowns began. The parents lamented that they had been retrenched from their jobs.

On the other hand, teachers felt that the owners' assertions that they did not have money to pay them were not genuine. One of the teachers, for example, said:

Preschool owners are selfish and greedy; they pay us little money, yet we make lots of money for their schools. These days they even hide behind Covid-19 and say they don't have money; even during the lockdowns, they paid us half salaries, telling us that parents had not paid school fee...just imagine, my landlord wants me to pay the full rent and my employer gave me half salary telling me stories. ...This is unfair

The above quotes show that the lockdowns had implications for school finances and relations between owners and teachers. As a result of financial constraints related to lockdowns, relations between teachers and preschool owners were affected because teachers were not paid their salaries. In addition, the financial problems influenced the termination of lease contracts between teacher tenants and their landlords because of the diminished enrolment of children and sporadic payment of school fees.

For example, one of the respondents who ran an ECCE centre said:

My landlord did not have mercy on me when I told him that I could not pay rent because I was given half salary during the lockdown....., so he kicked me out of the house. You know it was tough, especially that I don't have relatives in this village, so I ended up going home....and it became very difficult for me to find accommodation when schools reopened because landlords want 2 payments when a person occupies the house (a security deposit and rent for 1 month

These effects of Covid-19-related financial constraints on teachers seem not only peculiar to teachers in Botswana, but their counterparts in other countries also experienced them. For example, the International Task Force on Teachers for Education (n.d.). as cited by Balapile (2022), noted that in other parts of Africa, there was a similar problem of teachers being not paid on time, paid less than their normal salaries or not paid at all. In Kenya, contract teachers did not receive their salaries since payments depended on school management, which was impossible to do during school closures.

The joint UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank survey of country responses revealed that Burkina Faso and Guinea would suspend payments to contract teachers. At the same time, Ghana and Sierra Leone would continue to pay salaries which would still be reduced.

In other parts of Africa, there was a similar problem of teachers not being paid; their payments depended on school management, which was not possible to do during the school

#### 4.1.3. Disruption / Delays in Curriculum

Progress in curriculum delivery was also delayed because schools closing would be announced at short notice. Teachers had not prepared work for children to learn at their homes. Moreover, children could not use online as a platform for learning as the use of this mode of learning was far-fetched. Young children are naturally active, and the fact that most of them were unable to read and write or competent at computer keyboards made them the least relevant category of learners for online teaching and learning. They like child-initiated/child-directed activities, play-based/hands-on learning, and dynamic interpersonal interactions with other children and teachers (Jalango, 2021). Assessing children's work was also challenging because some parents could not send pictures of their child's work for teachers to mark and give feedback to the parents. (Balapile, 2022).

#### 4.1.4. Less Physical Parental Involvement

Bronfenbrenner's theory informs that there should be connections within the microsystem, such as between parents and the child's school, to strengthen children's learning (Guy-Evans, 2020). However, teachers lamented that during the pandemic, the bond between them and their parents declined because outsiders were not allowed inside school

premises, inclusive of parents. Communication between schools and parents was done by writing letters and phone messages and informing children to pass the message to their parents and guardians. After that, schools were able to communicate online, and some parents had challenges with responding to online communications sent by educators. It has been observed that children whose parents assisted them with their homework during the pandemic could get good grades (Goodall, 2016).

#### 4.1.5. Restriction of Indoor and Outdoor Play

Another challenge for teachers was that children could not play together indoors and outdoors as they were supposed to distance themselves all the time socially. This meant that every child had to have their play materials (which were expensive) and play each on their own. Therefore, children's social, emotional and language development was compromised as, according to (Berk, 1994), play improves their developmental domains. Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Balapile (2022), augments that children learn through socialization and that by playing together, they learn the language.

#### 4.1.6. Challenges Related to Wearing Masks

As part of the learning pedagogies, teachers should read stories to young children. However, wearing masks is said to have hindered some facial expressions by the teachers, which are vitally important for children to see, as they help them, especially in pronunciation and expression of emotions (Schultz et al., 2001; Smith, 2001; Trentacosta and Fine, 2010). Learners with a high level of emotional competence derived from stories are likely to regulate their feelings successfully and get along well with others. This effect was also experienced by the teacher as they could not easily see children's emotional expressions when wearing masks, making it difficult for the teachers to determine if they were happy. Emotions expressed by stories are essential as children are able to learn about other feelings they are not aware of. Children can learn feelings of empathy which are vital for their development.

Teachers also observed that children could not adhere to wearing masks throughout the day and had to constantly remind them to wear the masks or to wear them properly. They reported that children played around with the masks, snatched them from one another, lost them, tore them or deliberately exchanged them. This developed fear in the teachers that these behaviors could result in the fast spread of the pandemic. Vierstra (n.d.) observed that children fiddled with masks because they were impulsive. The masks could be sensory upsetting to them, or having problems with wearing or taking them off.

#### 4.1.7. Challenges related to Children's Stay at Home for Prolonged Periods of Time

Respondents also mentioned that the shutdowns meant that children stayed home for prolonged periods. It exposed

them to various situations. One of them is engaging in unhealthy behaviours/patterns. Examples of such patterns include decreased activity levels and poor eating habits that may eventually lead to diseases. Experts recommend that children under five should have approximately 180 minutes of physical activity daily. Unfortunately, lockdowns and closure of playgrounds and preschools led to reduced chances of physical activity for children, increasing the risk of sedentary behaviour in most cases.

Respondents also highlighted that the frequent lockdowns and children's prolonged stay at home somehow exposed children to various forms of abuse. One teacher specifically said:

'.....this Covid has done a lot of damage. ....You know, when we reopened after the last lockdown, one parent came and told me that we must treat her child very kindly because she is still recovering from the sexual abuse she experienced from one family member during the period when schools were closed, and she could not take the children to her grandparents in the rural areas due to Covid-related travel restrictions .....

Various newspapers in Botswana reported escalating cases of child sexual abuse in the country since the Covid 19 pandemic. For example, the Sunday Standard dated 22 November 2020 reported that 'more than three-quarters of children who are sexually abused do not tell anyone about it and many take the secret to their grave. Sexual abusers are more likely to be people the children know and could well be people the children care about; more than 8 out of 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser. They are family members, friends, neighbours, or babysitters – many hold responsible societal positions. The closer the relationship between the abuser and the victim, the less likely they will talk about it.

Ntshwarang (2022) asserts that in the context of many Botswana families, children are taught to be quiet and not talk too much. Our culture, unfortunately, creates a situation where children are taught and told not to talk back to adults or authority figures. Hence, you find that if an adult abuses a child, he/she is afraid to speak up and defenseless. This is especially so since children believe they are powerless, and if they were to pinpoint an adult abuser, they would be scolded and not believed. Children are also immature, so they become silent because they blame themselves for being in their situation and feel they brought it on themselves. Abusers also tend to threaten children from speaking the truth by threatening to kill them. Kids at an early stage are unknowledgeable of what sexual abuse is, so when it happens, they can't tell if they are being abused or not or if it is wrong or not.

According to the Commissioner of Police, Makgophe (2020), as cited in the Midweek Sun Newspaper of 14/10/2020, estimations of the total recorded cases from Botswana Police, on average, one child is raped every day in Botswana. Records show that the youngest victim was 2 years, indicating that many children are not safe even in their homes.

#### **4.2. Absence/lack of Digital Learning Facilities and No Teaching and Learning During Lockdowns**

Teachers and a majority of children came from families who did not have Wi-Fi facilities in their homes due to a lack of resources. Installation and maintaining Wi-Fi connection in Botswana is a privilege for the middle and upper classes. The lack of resources to connect internet for many families whose children attended preschools and were represented in this study shows that kids could not access remote/online learning. Furthermore, a lack of ICT skills meant that specialists always had to be around. Petrie (2020) also advises that suitable and relevant pedagogy for online learning requires expertise and exposure to information and communication technology for parents and teachers, hence requiring more money from the school management.

#### **4.3. Staff's Fears of Infection Due to Close Contact with Children and Limited Essential Resources**

All teachers who participated in the interviews lamented about fears of acquiring Covid 19 from the children. They held these fears despite the fact that Council had trained at least one safety and health educator (SHE) officer in each school. Teachers associated their fears with the fact that young children (especially those in the baby class) cannot wear masks, yet they are prone to influenza. Moreover, it is often difficult for young children to observe Covid protocols such as maintaining social distancing. The afore-mentioned training, among other things, highlighted the following guidelines as stipulated by UNICEF (2020): establish healthy hygiene behaviours and practices among young children (including hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, avoiding touching the face; integrating age-appropriate information about the virus in the curriculum); regular cleaning of the preschool classrooms, including toilets; removal of toys and materials that are hard to clean as well as informing parents about Covid-related measures the school has put in place. One teacher said that teachers' fears were so real that one of her colleagues, who had had Covid 19, ended up quitting her job for fear of reinfection.

#### **4.4. Environmental /Health and Safety Requirements and Higher Running Costs Due to New Health and Safety Requirements**

Linked to the above staff fears of infection due to close contact with children and related challenges of observing Covid-19 protocols such as maintaining social distancing, in some cases, difficulty in meeting these protocols was

exacerbated by limited spaces in the preschool facilities in some centers. Some of these preschool centers are crowded, making social distancing challenging. This, coupled with shared sanitary facilities like toilets, was a demanding exercise managing children and monitoring the use of and maintaining the required hygienic standards of such facilities. In some centers, this has come with some cost implications as the infrastructure has had to be upgraded, such as increased hand wash basins around the preschool premises for children to access water readily.

#### **4.5. Coping Mechanisms**

As noted in the preceding sections, respondents reported utilizing various coping mechanisms. However, they viewed almost all the mechanisms as ineffective. These include retrenching some teachers to cope with financial challenges; abiding by Council Covid related requirements such as upgrading sanitary infrastructure to meet the required hygiene standards, though this posed huge financial implications; as well as an increase in prices of school fees to care for the increased prices of commodities, though this resulted in some parents withdrawing children.

#### **4.6. Implications for ECCE Practice and Policy Coping Mechanisms**

Several findings of the study have implications for practice and policy. First, from the findings outlined in the previous sections, it becomes evident that the public health protocols enacted to counteract the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in dramatic changes in the physical and social environments within which preschool children represented in this study have been accustomed to growing and develop, both at school and home. Second, the finding that the high running costs of operating preschools (which partly arose from the fact that schools had to incur expenses to meet Covid-19 protocols) led some schools to close means that children's access to ECCE was reduced. Therefore, it challenges the government to review Botswana's ECCE policy so that the government can be mandated to provide financial support to preschools and all children during the crisis and other societal disasters such as Covid 19 to enable them access to ECCE. Third, the finding that children engaged in less physical activity was often inactive and had poor eating habits have implications for children's well-being in the sense that these dynamics could lead to obesity and health conditions such as sugar diabetes. This observation is consistent with the literature review (Eyler et al., 2021; Rundle et al., 2020; Vickery et al., 2020) that calls attention to children's health risks associated with Covid19 because movement restrictions lessons physical activity and increased opportunities for weight gain. Increased children's health risks during Covid 19 are also perpetuated by unhealthy eating habits such as constant snacking and decreased physical activity (Clarke et al., 2021; Jalongo

2021). Social distancing measures alter children's physical and social environments (Lancker and Parolin, 2020), as in the case of the preschools mentioned in this article, hence exposing children to constrained normal social growth and development (Suarez-Lopez et al., 2021). Therefore, at a practice level, there is a need for the government to create a platform for teachers to provide free physical education programs and tips for indoor exercises to parents and families to enhance physical movement and maintain healthy lifestyles during lockdowns. Fourth, the environmental and social changes due to Covid-19 went on to further highlight the existing environmental and social disparities, in particular when it came to the provision of alternatives to continued children's learning through online platforms, which for most of the children in the preschools in this study did not have access. As highlighted in the challenges outlined in the earlier section, most families from which these children came had no internet services because of their socio-economic status, which would not enable them. It results in disproportionate effects among children in low-income settings as the effects of Covid-19 impact both their intellectual and physical development compared to their peers who have access to internet services (Suarez-Lopez et al., 2021). Such inequalities also deny underprivileged children their right to education. At the policy and legislative level, the study results indicate that the government should also create subsidies to support privately owned ECCE centers to equip their centers with the internet and

technological tools needed to support online learning and flexible teaching strategies.

The study further revealed that some children experience different forms of abuse as a result of extended 'stay at home' periods with their families and caregivers.

Vasileva, Alisic and De Young (2021) assert that caregivers noticed that their young children appeared to be threatened and showed signs of vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the government needs to enforce a requirement that forces ECCE center owners to hire teachers that have pre-training on how to identify and handle abused children at school.

## 5. Conclusion

While public-oriented ECCE is a welcome development in Botswana, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that the country has a long way to go in successfully providing services during pandemics and disasters, as the paper has shown. The paper discussed the challenges encountered by the ECCE centers during Covid-19 and the coping strategies used at that time. It also highlighted the effects of Covid-19 on children's psychosocial needs and how it exposes children to health risks and deprivation of the right to education. The paper draws attention to key issues that should be considered in current and future practice and policy matters to respond to risks preschools are likely to face and children's welfare amid pandemics.

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