

## Teachers' Perceptions and Strategies on the Integrated Early Childhood Education Curriculum in Serenje District of Zambia

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to establish perceptions of early childhood teachers on integrated curriculum and strategies they can use to improve integrated planning in early childhood centers in primary schools of Serenje District. The study used a phenomenological design on a sample of twelve participants. The study collected data using interviews, classroom observations and document analysis that was analysed thematically. The study found that ministry of education curriculum policy for early childhood education did not support teacher perceptions on integrated curriculum, early childhood teachers positively perceived integrated curriculum, curriculum integration and teachers used integrated curriculum as an alternative to facilitate holistic learner development. The study recommended that the Ministry of Education and its stakeholders work together to revise provisions of the early childhood pedagogical policy guidelines so that it reflects integrated approaches in order to efficiently facilitate the holistic learning through play process of early childhood learners.

**Keywords:** *integrated approach, integrated curriculum, perception, early childhood education.*

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### Introduction

Inconsistent and isolated early childhood education practices Kalinde (2016) have been persistent in Zambia both before and after the introduction of early childhood education into the mainstream education curriculum of the ministry of education (MOE, 2021; MOE, 2020; Matafwali, 2013). Research studies indicate that in Zambia,

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a number of educational reforms from the post-independence era, such as Education Reform of 1977, Focus on Learning of 1992, and Educating Our Future of 1996, from which many recent educational reforms and implementation strategies had been derived, demonstrated curriculum development, implementation and transformation. The Zambian Ministry of Education made the following efforts to demonstrate the need for curriculum changes and raise targets for quality education in early childhood education. These recent implementation strategies included, among others, the current curriculum implementation strategies: revised curriculum 2013 (Kalinde, 2016; MOE, 2021); reviewed and standardized the country's Early Childhood Education (ECE) provision by offering a national curriculum that focuses on the child's overall development and competence –based. Further, a stronger partnership between early childhood stakeholders and a transfer of early childhood education from the ministry of Local Government, where it was dormant, to the Ministry of General Education (MOGE) made it a mainstream component of education (MOE, 2021; MOE, 2020; Matafwali, 2013).

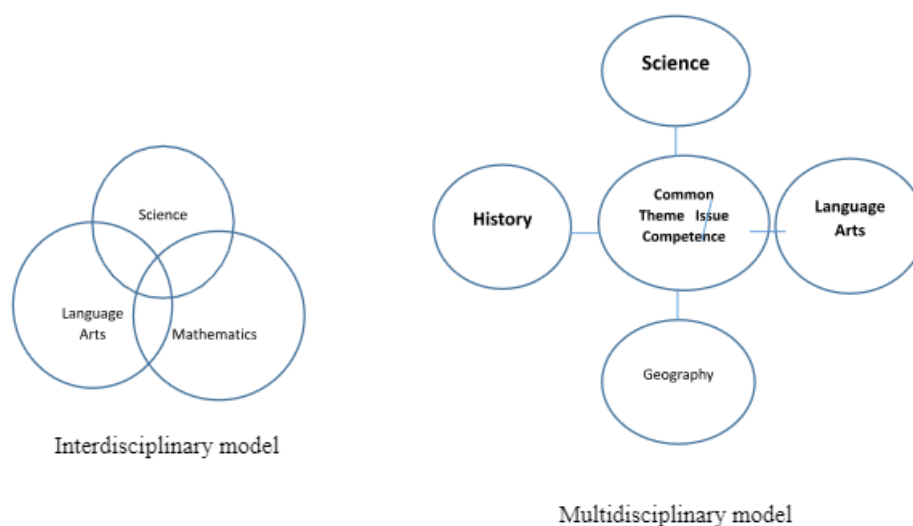
The stakeholders' meetings held with the ministry of education-highlighted challenges in the planning and implementation process for ECE classroom teachers and college lecturers. These curriculum implementers struggled to plan and implement lessons incorporating play as an approach to learning in early childhood education classes. The challenges included a variety of lesson plan formats; unclear integrated lesson plans; omission of outcomes on the lesson plans and undirected activities in lessons (MOE, 2020). Tembo and Nyimbili (2021) state that the other benefits of using a local language were that teachers were forced to use Nsenga in their teaching because learners provided answers in Nsenga instead of the Cinyanja which was not familiar to them. Nsenga was used in the teaching, learners became interested in their local language, and they wrote their language more than Cinyanja. This can also be linked to lessons which are integrated. They become interesting as there is a blend between what is being taught and the different subject areas in the same lesson. This makes learners be motivated to learn.

The question that besought attention was: why were there still inconsistent and isolated early childhood education practices such as a variety of lesson plan formats, unclear integrated lesson plans and lack of pedagogical skills and knowledge among ECE teachers in Serenje District of Zambia when government has attempted through ECE curriculum policy to address the problem? Kalinde (2016) argued that lack of clear policy governing the provision of ECE services and practices is the reason that Karakus (2021) described as the difficulty of “how” to implement curriculum undermines education quality, prevents the adoption of successful curricula, and makes educational innovations less likely to achieve their intended objectives. The Ministry of Education (MOE) described the difficulty of curriculum implementation in numerous research-based reports (Ministry of Education, 2020). For example, how to implement and plan for play (40% and 60%) as a teaching and learning approach embedded in the early childhood education curriculum was not clear.

The objective of the present study, therefore, is to understand teachers' perceptions on the integrated early childhood education curriculum in Serenje district of Zambia and highlight suggested strategies to plan integrated approaches as pedagogy to implement play approach in the learning process of early childhood learners. In addition, Nakawa (2019) revealed that the applicability of guided play in early childhood classes involved too many physical activities such as dance, games and songs without being attentive to academic skills that the curriculum intends to impart in



Early Childhood learners. The study addressed integrated curriculum therefore, as multidisciplinary that involves combining common themes, outcomes and content in different subject areas while they remain distinct and separate and interdisciplinary that involves teaching skills and knowledge for example, inquiry or communication across subjects and subjects are less distinct (Drake and Reid, 2018). The models multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary as such used in this paper were to understand the concept of integration.



**Figure 1. Continuum of integration**

**Source:** Drake and Reid, 2018

In line with the theories available, Nyimbili and Chalwe (2023) argued that on contrary, positive emotions like happiness, interest, joy, contentment and enthusiasm have been largely neglected. Some of the previous models focus on internal antecedents of behaviour like attitudes, values and intentions while others focus more on external issues such as norms, incentives and institutional constraints. In this context, the selected theory is relevant for this study.

The study found that early childhood teachers conceptualised integration differently among them and this affected the planning quality of integrated lessons. Hall-Kenyon and Smith (2013) in a shared definition of curriculum integration supposed that continued differing notions of what means to integrate academic subjects during instructional planning was clear among teachers. He argued that this was because early childhood teachers used a wide array of terms when discussing the construct: interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, fused, blended, connected, shared, thematic, networked, integrated, sequenced, webbed, immersed, unified, nested, coordinated and threaded. Boehme (2017) highlighted that reading and understanding the curriculum document is vital to planning. From this, Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers require to extensively read and understand both the curriculum framework and the Early Childhood Education (ECE) syllabus if they were to make headways of implementing integrated curriculum in Early Childhood Education (ECE).



Mutseekwa (2021) argued that teacher educators coincidentally integrated STEM practices in science lessons rather than planned. The study, therefore, assumed that Early Childhood Education (ECE) trainee teachers did not acquire the skills of integration during initial training because the study established that both Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers and lecturers planned integrated lessons in form of a list. In this view, Fisser and Thijis (2015) proposed that collaboration is among practices of the 21st Century Skills much needed for improvement of knowledge and skills. The second strategy was Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Therefore, collaboration and Continuing Professional Development positively influence integration skills and knowledge thus early childhood teachers would improve planning of integrated lessons. Cevikbas, Konig and Rothland (2023) asserted that teachers' competence in lesson planning could develop through review of empirical evidence. The scholar further argues that lesson planning is fundamental to the teaching and teachers can acquire planning competence through profession development. In support of this viewpoint, Kukano, Hapompwe, Siwale, and Chanda (2020) contend that in order to increase teacher quality, instructors, like students, need assistance in the form of manuals, teacher guides, and handbooks in order to be effective in delivering lessons.

Li and Chen (2017) study also found that the practice of blending curricula modes provided structured planning and implementation. For example, trilingual immersion curriculum was because of combining theme-based integrated curriculum with early trilingual program in China. Rijal (2021) also noted that while discussing curriculum integration, assumptions and beliefs about knowledge connects to traditional outcome-based education focused on the objective nature of knowledge and compartmentalised approach in pedagogical practices thus a kind of top-down version of curriculum has been practiced to date focusing on 'ends' rather than 'means'. He further argued that the ongoing practice of compartmentalised or separate subject curriculum has been discouraged in different times and context due to its rigid structure, process and assessment system. In view of the forgoing, the predominant traditional separate subject curriculum approach needs transformation into an integrated curriculum approach that involves knowledge construction not limited to only within the constraints of school walls.

Nonetheless, appreciating the learners' prior experiences, dynamic involvement and shared understanding in instructional activities so that through such participation, each learner will equal chance to equip themselves with various skills and make them perpetual real-life complex problem solvers through creative and critical reflective approach besides learning for the sake of achieving good grades in examinations. Furthermore, Cevikbas, Konig and Rothland (2023) also noted that lesson planning is fundamental to the teaching of all subjects in school. Janssen and Lazonder (2016) contended that infused integration help teachers in designing technology-based lesson plans.

An integrated curriculum by definition implied means of making meaningful connections between topics or skills addressed in different subject areas (Drake, 2015). Research also suggests that an integrated approach to learning was compatible with the way the brain functions. In another dimension, curriculum integration necessitates that the flow of knowledge be rearranged and was no longer defined by subject sequence; rather, it follows the rhythms and patterns of students' minds (Kane, 2015). The brain learns best in real-life, immersion-style, and multi-path learning. Fragmented and piecemeal presentation can forever kill the joy and love to learn (Jensen, 2016). Thus,



students apply knowledge and skills within a meaningful context and not in a restricted manner as in the subject based curriculum (Udvari-Solner and Thousand, 2016). Furthermore, Kukano, Hapompwe and Silavwe (2020) argue that there has never been a more pressing need than in the twenty-first century for teachers to engage the curriculum through ongoing professional development. High-quality educators who possess the necessary information, abilities, and attitudes are needed for this. Integrated knowledge and skills build the relationships, which exist among all things. Students and teachers are encouraged to create a learning partnership working together to examine a theme from various perspectives.

The focus of this study was on the perception of early childhood teachers on integrated lesson planning. This was because, based on the context of uncoordinated ECE practices (Kalinde, 2016; MOE, 2020), it was clear that practices vary among and within colleges and Early Childhood Education centers country wide due to different factors and reasons unknown.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore the teachers' perceptions and strategies on the integrated early childhood education curriculum in Serenje district of Zambia.

### **Objectives**

- i. To explore the early childhood teachers' views about planning integrated curriculum in ECE centers in primary schools of Serenje district.
- ii. To establish the practices Early Childhood teachers can adopt to implement the integrated planning in ECE centers in primary schools of Serenje district.

### **Methodology and Materials**

The study adopted a qualitative methods approach and used a phenomenological design to collect data in the early childhood centres in primary schools of Serenje District. The sample was 12 participants that comprised of five ECE teachers, three resource centre coordinators, two Senior Education Officers (SEO) and two VVOB Collaborating Partners (CP). The study collected data using interviews, observations and document analysis. The researcher used complete observation because Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2023) advised that observing and understanding linguistic diversity in a classroom needs the researcher to ensure that he or she becomes part of the learners and learn with them as well as from them. Through participant observation, the researcher is able to get closer to the truth and observe valid linguistic behaviour from the learner in a natural environment. ECE classes are sensitive in the Zambian context and if you are not part of the teaching staff learners stop participating. The study ensured participants signed an informed consent while their responses kept as a secret until after publication of the document. Data was analysed thematically by transcribing recorded interviews, coding and presenting using verbatim to maintain the meaning and quality of responses.





## Findings and Discussion of the Study

### Early Childhood Teachers' Descriptions on Integrated Curriculum in Early Childhood Education Centers in Primary Schools of Serenje District

Participants explained what they understood on the concept of integration. Various perceptions were noted. Data was collected through interviews with the teachers while field notes complimented what was observed on integrated planning through document analysis and classroom observations. Teachers in early childhood centres in primary schools of Serenje District responded with varied perceptions when asked to describe curriculum integration. In explaining curriculum integration, a teacher said:

*Integrated curriculum involves blending of subjects when planned and at the time of teaching. For example, literacy and mathematics is planned together in one lesson plan and taught as one lesson instead of two on a particular day.*

The teachers also acknowledged that they had never used any model during planning of integrated lessons. Teachers guessed the structure of integrated lesson hence forming a list of learning areas on one paper. The teacher said:

*I have not come across any models used in integrated approaches, but we normally use teaching and learning aids (T/LA).*

Teachers require using an integrated model because the model will guide teachers understanding and structure the type of integration required. Hall-Kenyon and Smith (2013) supported the findings of the study by talking about a shared definition of curriculum integration. He supposed that continued differing notions of what it means to integrate academic subjects during instructional planning was clear among teachers because early childhood teachers used a wide array of terms when discussing the construct: inter-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, fused, blended, connected, shared, thematic, networked, integrated, sequenced, webbed, immersed, unified, nested, coordinated and threaded.

The early childhood senior education officers when asked to describe curriculum integration explained that the ministry of education policy does not allow the use of curriculum integration. Senior Education Officer (SEO) said:

*I know the concept of integrated curriculum is sometimes used interchangeably but from the Government Republic of Zambia (GRZ) perspective, we may not have defined what integrated curriculum is. Therefore, looking at the curriculum framework, we only have a curriculum that has different types of learning areas. From another perspective, integrated curriculum is a curriculum which embraces different methodologies in line with prevailing situations. It is the bringing in prevailing situations or cross cutting issues into already existing curriculum. For example, the occurrence of Covid and its issues can be taught in various learning areas to enhance behaviour change and awareness.*

The senior education officers also viewed ECE teachers and lecturers to misunderstand the concept of curriculum integration because the description was different to what they planned. The SEO said:

*I understand the concept of integrated curriculum as curriculum that has combined all areas, all outcomes and activities so that they do not stand alone as subjects for the learning and teaching process. Personally, I noticed that lecturers and ECE teachers misunderstand integration. In their view, they assume that listing outcomes and subject content in one lesson plan and teaching in the same order is integration.*



The study found that Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers planned integrated lessons in form of a list, combining in one planned lesson all learning areas of the particular day on the timetable and taught in the same order with subjects showing as standalone hence some participants viewed that Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers and lecturers misunderstood integrated curriculum. To this, Mutseekwa (2021) argued that teacher educators coincidentally integrated STEM practices in science lessons rather than planned. The study, therefore, assumed that Early Childhood Education (ECE) trainee teachers did not acquire the skills of integration during initial training because the study established that both Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers and lecturers planned integrated lessons in form of a list.

The Resource Centre Coordinators (RCC) explained that integrated curriculum is the combination of subjects into one lesson. The District Resource Centre Coordinator (DRCC) supposed:

*My understanding on this matter of integration is that when subjects are not taught in isolation but together in one lesson then they are being integrated.*

The collaborating partners explained that integrated curriculum was twofold; firstly, it could mean a set of courses to taught and learned in a school system. Secondly, it can mean blended, fused or combined set of approaches and materials used in classroom instructional activities in the teaching and learning process. One collaborating partner said:

*Integrated curriculum was the merging of subjects bringing them together instead of leaving them as standalone subjects.*

The findings of the study were in tandem with Boehme (2017) whose findings showed that reading and understanding the curriculum document is vital to planning. From this, Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers require to extensively read and understand both the curriculum framework and the Early Childhood Education (ECE) syllabus if they are to make headways of implementing integrated curriculum in ECE. In addition, Nakawa (2019) revealed that the applicability of guided play in early childhood classes involved too many physical activities such as dance, games and songs without being attentive to academic skills that the curriculum intends to impart in Early Childhood learners. From the findings, the study therefore deduced that teachers' perceptions on integrated early childhood education curriculum were positive because they recognised that integrated curriculum provided holistic development of learners' developmental domains and milestones much needed for the future learning.

Strategies Early Childhood Teachers Can Adopt to Implement Planning of Integrated approaches in Early Childhood Education centers in primary schools of Serenje District

The participants elicited possible strategies that would improve planning of integrated approaches. The participants revealed that adopting strategies in planning of integrated approaches provided possibilities of improved planning skills and knowledge on integrated curriculum. The study established that collaborative planning and continuing professional developments improved own skills and knowledge on planning integrated approaches. One teacher said:

*I would say strategies such as collaboration, inquiry and continuing professional developments can be adopted by us ECE teachers during planning in that they help scrutinize and critic each other's thoughts. So being alone and planning alone would just make teachers stuck in their own ideas.*



The study findings show strategies early childhood teachers could adopt with a view to improving integration planning and implementation of integrated lessons. The first strategy was collaborative planning. Collaboration through WhatsApp groups, inquiry forums and physical team planning enhance knowledge and skill sharing. In supporting the findings, Fisser and Thijis (2015) argued that collaboration is among practices of the 21st Century Skills much needed for improvement of knowledge and skills. The second strategy was Continuing Professional Development (CPD). It can, therefore, be deduced that a collaborative teacher improves own skills and knowledge. Collaboration strategy provides a fertile ground for early childhood teachers to improve integration skills and knowledge both at planning and teaching stage.

The second strategy was using integrated curriculum models in planning integrated lessons. The strategy provides a road map on planning integrated activities effectively. Participants exemplified thematic model that involves making themes that incorporate different learning areas and taught as one lesson under the particular theme. The findings of Li and Chen (2017) study also found that the practice of blending curricula modes provided structured planning and implementation. For example, trilingual immersion curriculum was because of combining theme-based integrated curriculum with early trilingual program in China. The scholar further argued that in Early Childhood Curriculum reforms; develop culturally contextual appropriate practice sensitive to local context and not overly dependent on European or American ideas to achieve meaningful design of ideas for meaningful teaching and learning.

The study found that the education authorities do not completely offer direct support about integrated curriculum because there are a lot of gaps that the ministry required to bridge in order to support teachers. The Education Officers revealed that knowledge gap exists among teachers about how to integrate activities and material production that can guide about integration approach. They however established the following strategies: play pedagogy (puzzles, role and pretend play), explicit modelling, collaborative planning and use of planning models for example, thematic model. One Senior Education Officer (SEO) said:

*Currently there is only one policy that supports planning independent learning areas therefore, going by that we do not provide any support towards planning integrated lesson plans. We are, however, aware that in some schools the teachers plan to use integrated approach and we have educated those that we found planning integrated lessons on how they should go about it.*

Janssen and Lazonder (2016) support these findings when they suggested that infused integration help teachers in designing technology-based lesson plans support the study findings. In the study, the groups gave varied integrated support to see the implication. The results showed that the group that received integrated support had more integrated pedagogical and content-related justifications and higher quality lesson plans than the group who received separate specific subject support. This means that teachers require specific integration support with a system integration model already in place to show and guide the parameters of integration needed. In view of this thought, Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers should understand the models of integration so that integration of activities is in tandem with the particular model to improve integration.

In explaining the strategies, one resource center coordinators said:

*In developing integrated lesson plans teachers require to adopt strategies like collaboration and using a matrix to develop an integrated scheme from individualized syllabus. These strategies would help sharpen the structure, format and skill of planning integrated lesson plans.*





Consistence with the findings, Cevikbas, Konig and Rothland (2023) asserted that teachers' competence in lesson planning could develop through review of empirical evidence. The scholar further argues that lesson planning is fundamental to the teaching and teachers can acquire planning competence through profession development. CPD strategy provides fertile grounds for ECE teachers to build capacity in integration skills and knowledge so that ECE learners attain holistic development.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that Early Childhood Education teachers' perceptions on the integrated early childhood education curriculum though varied were positive. The positivity was because teachers understood that integration provided holistic learning and wider opportunities to explore practices, acquire knowledge and skills. The varied perceptions were because teachers used various array of terms to understand integration. The study also concluded that teachers lacked the skill of planning integrated activities because of policy restrictions and no instructional materials that showed integrated activities. The teachers acknowledged the possibility of integrating classroom instructions without altering the Early Childhood Education 2015 syllabus and the Zambia National Curriculum Framework (ZNCF). The realised benefits of the use of integrated approaches in the teaching and learning of early childhood learners provided learners with opportunities to learn in a holistic manner that helped them acquire a wider range of skills simultaneously. The other benefits were that learners acquired the ability to link skills and knowledge across subjects and the environment through situated practice. If the lessons are not integrated, the lessons would be boring and separating the learning content will make the learners become confused as ECE children learn from experiences and these experiences are integrated into their daily lives and curriculum. To this end, teachers who had the knowledge on hoe the ECE lessons should be organized had a positive attitude towards the lesson integration while those who did not have the integration knowledge had a negative attitude.

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