

PARENTAL FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN'S RETENTION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTERS: BUURI EAST SUB-COUNTY, MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated parental factors affecting the retention of children in early childhood education centers (ECECs) in Buuri East sub –county, Meru, Kenya. The study adopted a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data and key stakeholders such as teachers, center managers and County Ward administrators were targeted. The study findings showed that family size and number of children affected retention, with larger families, which often were resource poor, and therefore needed additional support to remain enrolled. The study also emphasized the importance of parental involvement, indicating that parents who maintained involvement had better retention rates. In addition, parental literacy levels were viewed as very important as more educated parents tended to value and support education for their children. The findings also reiterated the need to incorporate African traditions and values in the curriculum; provide enough funding; increase parental involvement and improve parental literacy.

Keywords: Children's Retention, Early Childhood, Education Centers, Parental Factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is crucial in the molding of a child's cognitive, emotional and social development (UNESCO & Klineberg, 2015) considering the evolving nature of the global landscape today. Maintaining children's continued enrollment in Early Childhood Education Centers (ECECs) is a concern across the world however the rate of retention varies due to several factors. However, despite education being universally acknowledged as a basic human right, there are continuing disparities as it comes to enrollment and retention at schools, especially in marginalized communities. In 2016, according to UNESCO's 2016 Global Monitoring Report, 77 million children were not enrolled in school (UNESCO, 2016). This problem replicated globally across the world especially in developing and underdeveloped countries.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a crucial phase in the formal education of all children as it is the foundational upon which all subsequent levels of education are built on (Akindele, 2011). ECE level of education arms children moving to primary school and helps them to avoid feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Efforts to support early childhood education in many regions have failed to improve enrolment disparities between urban and rural areas (Post, 2013). This has been attributed to multiple factors like socio cultural factors, financial challenges, Class size and Parental factors. This study sought to establish the extent to which parental factors influenced children's retention in early childhood education centers (ECECs) in Buuri East Sub-County, Meru County, Kenya?

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this study, a descriptive research design was used and a mixed methods approach was employed with the incorporation of qualitative and quantitative data collections techniques. The research was aimed at a variety of respondents including 56 Early Childhood Education Centers (ECECs), 112 ECE teachers, 56 center managers, and 2 County Ward administrators in Buuri East Sub-County. In selecting 62 participants for the study, a purposive sampling technique was adopted.

A pilot study was conducted to improve data reliability and validity through refinement of the data collection instruments consisting of questionnaires, observation checklists, and interview schedules. It was these instruments that were designed to adequately capture information about the objectives of the study. Careful instrument design and in-depth discussions with respondents also increased their validity and reliability. Descriptive and inferential statistics such as regression analysis were used to analyze quantitative data. Thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data to find recurring patterns and themes.

The study was conducted in an ethical manner and included obtaining consent for informed participation using resources, keeping records in a confidential and anonymous manner and following ethical guidelines in data collection and reporting. Through this robust methodology, a thorough investigation into the effecting factors of children's retention in ECECs in Buuri East Sub County was possible, resulting into a holistic understanding of the issue from qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Family Size and Number of Children:

The study findings indicated that the number of children and their family size play an important role in determining the retention rates in ECECs in Buuri East Sub-County, Meru. Amongst the participants, 11% reported there was no impact, 19% reported there was a minor impact a minor, 10% reported a moderate impact, 23% reported a large impact and 37% of the respondents reported a very large impact on retention, respectively. 93% of the head teachers confirmed that these factors had significant impact on retention rates in ECECs. Thus, these results suggested that larger family size posed difficulties in keeping children in ECECs because of financial or logistical arrangements.

Parental Participation

Parental involvement in ECEC programs was also a key determinant of retention. The responses showed that 3% respondents thought it had no effect, 21 % thought it had some extent of influence, 31 % indicated moderate extent, 18 % marked large extent, and 27% answered the extent of influence was very large. Parental participation was also found to be instrumental in improving learner retention as found by head teachers in the region. Parental engagement in school related activities contributes to the continued attendance of children in school and their continued commitment to education. Parental activity increased through parent teacher meetings, awareness campaigns and workshops contributed positively to retention rates of students.

Parental Literacy Levels

Retention rates in ECECs were found to be influenced by parental literacy levels. Specifically, 19% of the respondents felt that the extent of the literacy had no influence, 15% felt it had a little influence, 18% felt a moderate influence, 29% felt a large influence, and 19% felt it has a very

large influence. These findings were collaborated by 92% of Head teachers in Buuri East Sub County. Thus, we established that parents with higher levels of literacy placed more importance on and engage in greater support of their children's early education.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As such, the findings carry a range of implications for policy and practice in Buuri East Sub-County. Targeted interventions should be introduced by policymakers to support families with multiple children attending ECECs, including transportation assistance and flexible scheduling. Parental involvement in early education is promoted in schools and communities and its positive impact on school attendance is acknowledged. Improving parental literacy can also increase the number of informed and engaged parents, which can in turn yield better results for children's education. Policy interventions that strengthen these areas and encourage parental engagement, adult literacy and financial and social support of families could improve retention rates and overall educational success for children in the region.

Significance of Chi-Square Tests

By calculating the chi An abycsis we know parental factors largely contribute to children holding onto ECEC as the evidence on which to base policy reforms and resource allocation. These findings provide insight to decision makers on how to best target interventions. The parental factors were tested to see if they significantly influence retention with the calculated chi-square value of 230.68 above the critical value at 5 per cent confidence. The alternative hypothesis was therefore accepted meaning that parental factors have a substantial effect on retention of children in ECECs in Buuri East Sub County, Meru.

Contribution to the Field

The analysis in this study is valuable in understanding different factors that support retention of teachers in ECECs in Buuri East Sub-County, Meru. These insights are applicable to this region, and are useful in understanding how to inform education practices and policies in areas that face similar challenges. With solutions for parental and family related factors, education stakeholders can combat dropout rates and widen reach of early childhood education to make more children benefit from it.

Main findings include the fact that parental and family factors are key in children retention within ECECs in Buuri East Sub-County, Meru. Family size, parent participation in ECEC programs, and parent literacy levels are all major factors that affect retention rates among children enrolled in ECEC programs. It is critical that we identify and address these elements which are key parts of making early childhood education centers better and hence more children can benefit from quality early education in the region. The study provides important insights into the dynamics of ECEC retention and emphasizes the importance of targeted intervention to enhance children's educational trajectories.

4. CONCLUSION

Parental and family related factors are seen to play a significant role in retention of children in ECECs in Buuri East Sub county. Family size and number of children affects retention as large families tend to face financial constraints that reduce continued enrollment. The importance of parental involvement as a key factor is apparent with scope for continued development on levels

of engagement, while the impact of parental literacy on retention shows that parents need to be armed with the necessary skills to support their children's education.

Traditional African values and customs are still an integral part of education and therefore needs to be incorporated in ECEC programmes. Funding from county and national governments is needed for these programs to be implemented adequately, and proper financial record keeping is required so funds are not misused. There are other factors to consider as well, including the quality of caregivers and tutors, since experienced professionals with good ethical values make these learning environments supportive.

Thirdly, the children's rights should be prioritized and child friendly learning spaces should be created that can guarantee enrollment and retention, and overall development and welfare of children in ECECs.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve on retention and enhance the overall effectiveness of early childhood centres in Buuri East sub County, Meru the following recommendations are provided in the study.

- i. Financial support for large families - The Ministry of Education in partnership with the national and county governments should give targeted financial aid like bursaries, Fee subsidies, and scholarships to families with many children to assist the parents with the costs associated with school fees.
- ii. Improve parental involvement – Schools and the government ought to improve parental involvement in the day to day affairs of the schools through running workshops, seminars and regular meetings in which they keep parents abreast of their children's educational status.
- iii. Improve Parental Literacy – The national and county governments ought to partner together and establish adult literacy programs through which parents are given basic education and skills.

Early childhood education centers located in Buuri East Sub-County, Meru, can achieve better effectiveness by implementing these recommendations, enabling children to have a supportive and enriching learning environment that leads to better retention and educational success.

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