

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM: PERSPECTIVES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The early years of a child's life lays the foundation for life-long learning. It is a critical period in the development of mental functions of children. It has been shown that early childhood education can be a principal input into a child's formal education. A number of studies link early childhood development and education (ECDE) to increases in school readiness for primary school and school readiness is a vital predictor of early school achievement (Forget-Dubois et al 2007). A skilled and ardent early educator plays a significant role in the lives of young children. Teachers of young children need to have a sound academic knowledge and be able to apply this in practical ways when interacting with young children. Furthermore, educators will reflect on their teaching techniques, strength and challenges and seek ways to develop both personally and professionally in order to be confident and competent teachers for young children. ECDE teacher professionalism is crucial in improving teaching quality for young children. Indeed, improving teaching quality in ECDE is an essential element for improving our nation's quality of education. This article brings out important concerns on professionalism of ECDE teachers. It examines the quality of training, the variations in duration, ethics and the service ideal among teachers. It also interrogates the future of ECDE professionalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is regarded as the most significant time in a person's life because it is the base for growth throughout an individual's lifespan. Heckman (2012) underlines that learning starts in infancy, long before formal education begins, and continues throughout life. To him, early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success, just as early failure breeds later failure. Quality must be fundamental to the development and implementation of Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) programmes.

A good ECDE should be provided by a professional care giver; a person trained in the skills and methods of dealing with children. An accomplished and zealous early teacher plays an important role in the lives of young children. Teachers of young children need to be well equipped with enough intellectual understanding and be able to relate this in practical ways when working with

young children. Furthermore, teachers will reflect on their teaching techniques, strengths and challenges and look for ways to develop both personally and professionally in order to be confident and adept teachers for young children. For the ECDE teacher professionalism is fundamental in improving teaching quality for young children. Precisely, improving teaching quality in ECDE is an essential element for improving our nation's quality of education.

The study of professions and professionalism has a long standing tradition in sociological research from the beginning of the 20th century (Evetts, 2006; Crook, 2008). Sociologists have tried to identify the specific values that are connected to professions and at the same time tried to identify criteria to separate professions from other occupations. As in most debates on professions and professionalism, the characteristics of professions are connected to positive and prestigious elements. Many occupations have tried to identify their professionalism, thus trying to become part of the elite. This also applies to teachers.

In many publications that are focused on teachers, the use of the term educational professional is used deliberately to indicate and emphasize the prestige and status of the teacher. Teacher policies are full of “professional standards, professional development, and professional communities” to mention but a few. This paper will use the following definitions of the terms profession, professional, and professionalism.

The term ‘profession’ stands for an occupation which requires some specialized study and training, and the purpose of which is generally to provide skilled services and guidance in lieu of a definite fee or remuneration. A profession is a calling and implies acquisition of a fond of knowledge, range and skills and their application in service to humanity. The services rendered by a profession may be direct as in the case of teacher educators, that is teacher of a teacher (retrieved from <http://www.preservearticles.com>).

A ‘professional’ is someone who has completed formal education and training in one or more professions. The term also describes the standards of education and training that prepare members of the profession with particular knowledge and skills necessary to perform the role of that profession (<http://wikipedia.org>)

Professionalism refers to that peculiar nature of a specific occupation which entails, for commencement as well as continuation, maintenance, individually and

collectively, of a certain standard in relation to knowledge, skills and behavior, which standards are such that they ensure the user of the services the profession provides a high, expected and usually objectively measurable level of competence and commitment, and which standards afford the profession a legitimated status, established right to privileged communication and relatively great autonomy, on the basis of the profession, from societal supervision and control (<http://www.renaissance.com>)

DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM

One way of looking at the professionalism of teachers is by comparing them to classical professions like doctors or lawyers and to identify similarities and differences. Using these classical professions as ideal examples, distinctive characteristics are derived which could be used to separate professions and non-professions and to identify similarities or differences with other occupations.

Typical attributes are outlined by Snoek, Swennen and Van der Klink (2009):

- **Professional autonomy**

Professions tend to be autonomous, which means they have a high degree of control of their own affairs: “Professionals are autonomous insofar as they can make independent judgments about their work”. This usually means ‘the freedom to exercise their professional judgment. Professional autonomy comes as a result of professional monopoly of the members of the profession who have control over their own work.

However, it also has other meanings. “Professional autonomy is often described as a claim of professionals that has to serve primarily their own interests... this professional autonomy can only be maintained if members of the profession subject their activities and decisions to a critical evaluation by other members of the profession (Snoek et al., 2009). The concept of autonomy can therefore be seen to embrace not only judgment, but also self-interest and a continuous process of critical evaluation of ethics and procedures from within the profession.

- **Control over entry requirements to the profession and further professional development of the individual members**

Teacher professionalism entails involvement in the entrance to the profession. All professions have power. This power is used to control its own members and also its area of expertise and interests. A profession tends to dominate, police, and protect its area of expertise and the conduct of its members, and exercises a dominating influence over its entire field. Which means that professions can act monopolistically, rebuffing competition from ancillary trades and occupations, as well as subordinating and controlling lesser but related trades. A profession is characterized by the power and high prestige it has in society as a whole. It is the power, prestige and value that society confers upon a profession that more clearly defines it. On the other hand, professionals acquire some of their power and authority in organizations from their expertise and knowledge. Professions also have the power to judge, and subsequently even to exclude members who do not keep to the professional standards and ethical code of that profession.

- **It involves a code of ethics**

The ethical code is used as a means to win the trust of the public and public bodies (often governments) that have the power to license the profession and its members, and to serve as a guideline for good conduct of the members of that particular profession. Professionalism demands a high standard of professional ethics, behavior and work activities while carrying out one's profession. The professional owes a higher duty to a client, often a privilege of confidentiality as well as a duty not to abandon a genuine client just because he or she may not be able to pay or remunerate the professional. Often the professional is required to put the interest of the client ahead of his own interests.

- **A strong academic knowledge base consisting of formal or technical knowledge (Abbot, 1998).**

Professionalism demands prolonged specialized training in a body of abstract knowledge, normally for a period between 3 and 5 years. According to Abbot, "Academic knowledge legitimizes professional work by clarifying its foundations and tracing them to major cultural values". It demands possession of a body of knowledge and extended practical training.

It sets up its own professional organization and has clearly defined membership of a particular group with a view to safe-guarding the interests of the profession.

At the same time, the knowledge in society and technical changes with its “instantaneous, globalized availability of information and entertainment (Hargreaves, 2000) calls for other qualities of modern professions, hence the following:

- Increased attention to the life-long professional development of professionals throughout their careers. It is generally accepted that the knowledge intensive society, lifelong learning becomes essential for career-long professional development (European Council, 2009). It therefore demands continuous in-service training of its members.
- Hargreaves (1994) points out that a focus on new forms of relationships and collaboration with colleagues, students and their parents is indispensable. Whitty (2008) not only emphasizes collaborative professionalism between colleagues in the school in professional learning communities, but also “democratic professionalism” including collaboration with stake holders outside the school.
- Emphasis on improvement and innovation. Teaching is seen as a dynamic and innovative profession, where teachers will need to reflect on their own practice and contribute to the improvement and innovation of the profession.
- A knowledge base that is as a result of research, experience and reflection. This feature of professionalism leads to appeals to involve teachers in action research, self-study and practioner inquiry (Cochran, Smith & Lytle 2009)

CHALLENGES TOWARDS PROFESSIONALISM OF ECDE TEACHERS IN KENYA

Basing on the above definitions and attributes of “professionalism” there is no doubt that it is in acute shortage in the teaching profession in Kenya in general and in ECDE in particular. A spot check on 20 schools in Uasin Gishu and Nandi Counties revealed some rather important factors that contribute to this lack of professionalism. Among them:

Poor pay

In Kenya the ECDE teacher is generally ill-paid and often disparaged. In 2010, the revenue expenditure on ECDE education was a measly 0.7%. It is heartening to note this situation has improved slightly in the last 3 years with the government injecting Community Support Grants and capitation grants of Ksh947 per child. But this is a miserable percentage considering that this is the level where Kenya's educational base lies. It was also established that there are ECDE teachers who are paid as low as Ksh500 a month; now and in this era!! Unbelievable! It is widely acknowledged that ECDE teachers pay is low and for many it falls below the Government's level of minimum wages which now stands at Ksh7000. It is important that ECDE teachers salary are made to be commensurate with their very vital role of laying the foundation for the nation's development and to ensure that teaching at this level is an attractive career option.

Absence of any effective system of accreditation, licensing and certification and also absence of appropriate standards for the above system

In Kenya, licensing, accreditation and certification are done at the government level. However, the very concept of standardization in ECDE is in effect unfamiliar in the country. To begin with, because accreditation is not a requisite of teacher education programs, their worth varies extensively, with outstanding programs standing alongside substandard ones that are allowed to function even when they do (an accreditation of sorts is present but it is highly ineffective), they perform an outright insufficient job. With the shortage of inadequate staff (Chepsiror, 2011) and probably finances for supervision, the colleges make do with one inspection done at the time of registering of the college by officials of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health, albeit with many shortfalls. It was established that some of this officials do not physically inspect the premises. Because of this some ECDE training colleges are situated in unsuitable places that do not meet the legal requirements.

Recognition of good performance in teaching has never been considered. For instance when a teacher exhibits good performance in preparing his/her pupils well for standard one admission, there is no certificate awarded to that effect, and when there are any, they are localized and have no promotional benefit to the teacher. There is also general disparity in setting up ECDE colleges because of cost implications. To put up a new college would cost much more than setting up a

college in existing institutions (like village polytechnics and secondary schools) or affiliating it to an existing university. These disparities affect the quality of services offered. Those within established institutions channel their resources to instructional resources as opposed to the new ones who direct their resources to set up infrastructure whose cost can go up to a total of 10 million Kenya Shillings.

Inadequate Teacher Education

According to Otunga (2011) the training of teachers for ECDE is done in different ways by different agencies. The most common training is done at two levels; certificate and diploma. Both these courses take duration of two years for pre-service and six school holidays for in-service. The school holidays are commonly scheduled for April, August and December each year. To be eligible for Diploma one requires DICECE, Kindergarten headmistress Association or Montessori certificate, P1 or C plain in KCSE or its equivalent. To qualify for certificate training one needs to have a KCSE certificate with a D+.

The debate that rages on within Teachers Service Commission (TSC) and other related agencies is whether this qualification is not too low for admission to train as a teacher at this very important level. The government colleges presently admit student teachers with C+ in KCSE for diploma and TSC might not employ trained teachers with lower grades.

Nonetheless, the rising demand for ECDE has led to mushrooming of privately owned ECDE Teacher Training institutions in addition to the government managed ones. Despite the significant gains in enrolment in this sector, there is wide variation in the type and quality of services provided. Extensive distinctions exist between the institutions in the case of physical facilities, level of trained personnel, supporting services and activities and monitoring and evaluation.

Physical facilities

Kafu (2011) laments at the current state of materials used for preparing school teachers; the facilities and resources are inadequate, obsolete, dilapidated and unsuitable for producing a competent teacher who can operate in this century. This paper concurs with him on this. Since

many of the colleges are established hurriedly, they do not meet the minimum requirements for training teachers for young children.

Quality of training personnel

Kenya's enthusiasm for educational opportunities cannot be overemphasized. It has provided great momentum for efforts to expand ECDE teacher education. Currently, there are innumerable such institutions including public and private universities and as such the personnel qualified to teach at this level are in short supply. What ensues is that some proprietors opt for unorthodox methods of plugging this gap by engaging unqualified and incompetent lecturers.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance forms the moral fiber of any education system. Even as enrolment rates in ECDE Teacher Training levels have increased tremendously, it is most likely that learning achievement is below the expected standards as colleges are hardly inspected by the Ministry of Education Quality Assurance officers and as such, they have seen better days. In addition to the lack of adequate initial training, the government and the schools invest modestly in on-going professional development for practicing teachers and spend much of these limited resources on unproductive lopsided workshops.

The standards of teaching need to be updated. Presently, there is very little realization that even a high level degree is not guarantee that a person is an effective school teacher. In as much as ECDE Teacher Training colleges and universities place a lot of emphasis on practical teaching (Micro-teaching and Teaching Practice) little time and effort is accorded to these very important courses. Also the institutions undertaking the tasks of Training teachers should develop and update a curriculum for this purpose which is aligned to specific needs of ECDE teachers.

Collaboration and Collegiality

Teacher collegiality has been consistently highlighted in recent years as a critical factor in the success of processes of educational change and professional development. Johnson (1990) asserts that schools that foster collegiality often have organizational norms that overcome the

uncertainties and isolation of teaching by supporting collegial dialogue, the exchange of ideas, debate over issues and techniques.

However, in the schools that were visited in Uasin Gishu and Nandi counties, most ECDE teachers were cut off. Administratively their classrooms were placed a distance away from the rest of the school, just like a study by Marchesani (2007) revealed that elementary teachers are generally isolated in their rooms most of the day except a few moments for collegial interaction in the faculty lounge or at the faculty meetings.

Psychologically, the ECDE teachers' sense of efficacy and self-esteem due to factors such as qualification and the level one is teaching (nursery) tend to isolate them from the rest of the staff. One is therefore left to his own fate, to sink or swim in the difficulties he/she encounters in the classroom.

The ECDE teachers also are not affiliated to any teachers unions or associations; they have no one to advocate for their welfare and thus left to tackle their issues individually. There is need, therefore, to use effective team work and teacher leadership to support ECDE teachers in their quest to deliver the basic curriculum effectively. There is need to foster collaborative professionalism with other teachers and stakeholders, to consult together and to learn new strategies. Studies have shown that collegiality stimulates teachers to be risk-takers and feel comfortable and confident enough to participate in leadership roles outside their classrooms. Teachers who participate in policy making feel less frustrated and powerless. They know their voice and opinions are vital to the success of the school and are given importance by other teachers and administrators.

Working together in a collegial environment is imperative for ECDE teachers. An environment rich in collegiality is one where individuals feel free to express their emotions, negative and positive, to admit to failure and weakness, to voice resentment and frustration, to demonstrate affection. By contrast, a culture of individualism tends to increase emotional stress for its members by fostering an illusion that others are coping and that one's fears are born of unique incompetence; requiring individuals to pretend to feelings they do not own; by failing to promote

the habit of day – day communication so that small interpersonal differences build up into major problems (Nias 1998). Yet ECDE teachers work as individuals cut off from the rest of the school staff by the factors mentioned earlier and also because in most cases the ECDE centre is on its own away from the rest of the school.

Service to the client

For a professional, service to the client should be of the essence before all else. Nevertheless with the commercialization of education, the ECDE teacher is bound to send a pupil home because of fees and not flinch about the pupil missing classes or the psychological torture this is causing the learners; all in the name of money contrary to the calls of a profession.

Professional ethics

Professional ethics is the driving force for effectiveness and efficiency. Currently, there exists a teacher's code of conduct and ethics drawn by the TSC. However, this code does not concern the ECDE teachers because they are not employees of the TSC. Furthermore, most, if not all are unaware of the existence of such a code. At the grassroots level, it is up to individual school heads to lay down expected manner teachers are to conduct themselves, and this does not go beyond that particular school. There is therefore no standard way all ECDE teachers are expected to conduct themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Available evidence suggests that teachers are considered the most important in-school impact factor on the quality of student achievement and that the main driver of the variation in student learning at school is the quality of teachers (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). The Government should, consequently, formulate policy documents and devote resources for the quality improvement of ECDE teachers and teacher professionalism. To achieve this we recommend following:

- Regular review should be conducted by the Quality Assurance and the Research divisions of the Ministry of Educations so as to provide opportunities to identify training needs of ECDE teachers; recognize good performance and more effectively address

underachievement. As such all teachers, regardless of their grade should be provided with mandatory in-service training periodically. This should be done during school holidays so as not to disrupt normal learning programs for children.

- To improve educational out-comes in ECDE there is need to encourage a culture of partnership and collegiality. This can be done through regular meetings for ECDE teachers.
- There should be a clear scheme of service for all ECDE teachers so as to consolidate those in the private and public sector.
- There is need to establish a code of conduct and ethics to govern the ECDE sector

It is clear from the foregoing that ECDE teacher's morale and motivation in Kenya is at its lowest ebb. Having interest and desire to do a job, as well as holding positive attitude towards the profession are important elements in attaining a high level of performance and professionalism. Therefore, there need to professionalize teaching in ECD centres in terms of supervision, training, remuneration, manpower and improvement of teacher training facilities. Indeed, all stakeholders in education should visualize and actualize this desired improvement in order to give ECDE some respectability and recognition in Kenya and beyond

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