



Role of Community in Enhancing the Welfare of Early Childhood Education Centres in Meru South County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The central problem of this study was that although the government is providing direct grants to primary schools under the free primary education (FPE) financing scheme, the allocation for Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres is still quite minimal. The management of these ECD centres also rests on the headteachers and the community. The purpose of this study was to find the role of the community in enhancing the welfare of the ECE centres in Mwimbi Division of Meru South County . A descriptive survey design was used. Data for the study were collected from 14 headteachers, 14 teachers and 28 parents with children in sampled 14 ECDE centres yielding a sample size of 56. The Study employed questionnaires for headteachers and teachers and Focus Groups Discussion (FGD) guides for parents. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative and quantitative techniques, and results presented using frequency tables, bar graphs and pie charts. The study found out that the, community supported the programme in several ways including: direct financial assistance, participating in physical development, maintaining feeding programme for learners, developing learning materials, amongst others. However, the level of contribution was inadequate due to poverty and ignorance among parents. Therefore, the study recommends that the government should not only allocate substantial funding to this sector but also sensitize the community to strengthen their keen interest on the education of their children in ECE centres.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Problem

Early childhood education and care are on the reform agenda in many countries, including those in Africa (Agbenyenga,2017). The purpose of ECE is to ensure that the first1,000 critical days of a child life for acquiring fundamental cognitive, physical, emotional and social skills. It is during these formative years that the parents and community assist the infants for the systematic and most rapid development process that occurs. Motor and verbal skills, like an infant pulling herself to stand or a toddler learning to express his feelings with words, lay the foundation for sensory processing, coordination, alertness, and critical problem solving (Agbenyenga,2017). Yet, statistics on ECE in Africa are appalling, with less than 12 % of Africa's children currently have access to Early Childhood and Education.

The aim of early childhood education and care is to provide developmental support and care for children in their formative years so that they can acquire the skills necessary for future learning and success in school. This success is expected to benefit the social and economic development of society at large. Although Africa has undergone remarkable transformations since its contact with Europeans and other foreign cultural elements, the promotion of universal access to quality early childhood education and care remains a significant challenge for educators and policymakers in Africa.

According to Broakye-Boeten (2010) ECE provides insights into how Africa emerged from this contact with a "bruised cultural identity" that has impacted heavily on child development in Africa. Two revolutionary bodies of research have redefined the way we think about early childhood development (Sonorane,2018). One is the evidence on the large positive economic and social returns from investments in the early years of life. The other is the knowledge generated from advances in neuroscience on brain development, which underlines the importance of the nurturing qualities of the environments where children grow and learn. Both indicate that early childhood presents a crucial window of opportunity for providing an integrated package of development services that match this sensitive period in brain development. The ability to translate the science of early childhood development into effective policies and programs and scaling up their implementation has been variable in many ways(Sonorane,2018).

Several studies, research works and agendas invariably mention the recognition of early childhood as the basis for sustainable development as one of the priorities and success stories for the African continent. Yet, about 200 million children globally fail to reach their potential in cognitive development because of inter-related factors of poverty, inadequate care and poor health experienced mainly at the home and community

level. (Granthan-Mcgregor,2007; Munthal, Mvula & Silos, 2014). This is especially the case in resource poor countries such as Malawi. The high prevalence of poverty generally leads to inadequate food and poor hygiene and sanitation which consequently increase the vulnerability of children to diseases including malnutrition and related disorders. Severe clinical malnutrition also leads to deficits in intelligence and school performance. These issues affecting children need to be urgently addressed if developing countries are to achieve MDGs 1 and 2 as well as Sustainable Development Goals, which are to eradicate poverty and hunger; and to ensure that all children complete primary schooling, respectively. The first few years of human development are crucial as it is a time when somatic changes including growth and development of the brain occur (Walker, et.al.2007).

Over the past decade, considerable public and private attention has been focused on strengthening strategies for early childhood development and family support. States are steadily increasing support for child development, child care, and family support programs targeting young children and families, (Cauthene, Knitzer & Ripple,2001) and initiatives focused on cities are growing (Knitzer & Adey,2001). Advocates have promoted broad community mobilization and public awareness about the importance of early childhood. For the most part, however, activity to promote healthy child development and provide support to families with young children has not been linked with efforts to promote family economic security in low-income communities. At the same time, initiatives to promote community building and address economic issues in low-income communities have typically not explicitly addressed the developmental and family support needs of young children and families. It is against this backdrop that this study set out to examine the nature of community participation in Early Childhood Education in Meru South County.

1.2. State of the Art Review

Literature is prolific which shows increasing priority being placed on the development of national intersectoral early childhood (ECD) policies in Sub-Saharan Africa (Neuman & Devecercelli,2012).Recent developments have stressed the need to for holistic approaches to learning that children's physical and intellectual well-being and socio-cultural and cognitive developments are all inter-related (Granthan-Mcgregor et.al.2007).In the last decade, as countries have increasingly recognized the importance of reaching children during early years, there has been a proliferation of national intersectoral (or integrated 0 ECD policies in countries around the world, including Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the rapid growth in national ECD policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, the enrollment of children currently under parents and community is still very low (Neuman & Devecercelli,2012).

In the last decade, as countries have increasingly recognized the importance of reaching children during their early years, there has been a proliferation of national intersectoral (or integrated) ECD policies in countries around the world, including those in Sub-Saharan Africa. When the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All Goals were set in 2000, few countries had adopted national ECD policies. According to a review by Turkington (2001), in sub-Saharan Africa, only Mauritius and Namibia had established ECD policies in 2001 (cited in Vargas-Baron, 2008). By 2012, the situation had changed dramatically.

A recent review commissioned by UNESCO revealed that 23 out of 47 countries have adopted national ECD policies. Another 13 countries have policies under development or drafted, but not yet approved (Vargas-Baron & Schipper, 2012). Table 1 summarizes the current status of national ECD policy development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Around the world, many stakeholders have supported this growth in national ECD policy development. For example, development partners, including UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank, have provided financial and technical support for many national efforts to address the needs of young children and the fragmentation and gaps in existing policies, laws, and programs. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Working Group on Early Childhood Development encouraged national ECD policy development in a number of countries, through regional and cross-country assessments, and capacity-building activities (Aidoo, 2008). Specifically, the ADEA Working Group on ECD commissioned case studies of ECD policies in Ghana, Mauritius, and Namibia in 2000-2001 to identify lessons learned for other countries in Africa. Subsequently, in 2002-2003, the Working Group funded technical support to national ECD policy planning in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Senegal. Policies in all three countries have since been approved and lessons learned have been shared with other countries (Vargas-Baron, 2008).

In addition, a series of four continent-wide ECD conferences organized by ADEA and held in Kampala (1999), Eritrea (2002), Ghana (2005), and Senegal (2009) brought together African and international experts, policymakers, and development partners to help generate support for comprehensive early childhood policies and programs on the continent. Comparing ECD Policies and Institutional Arrangements in East Africa. Despite the rapid growth in national ECD policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is still much to be done to ensure that children's holistic needs are met. We argue that for most countries, national ECD policies are a useful first step, but not sufficient. For example, although most countries' ECD policies call for expansion of services across health, nutrition, education, and child protection sectors, the pace of implementation has been slow.

The recognition of early childhood as the foundation for sustainable development is inherent in the Global 2030 Agenda, which gives a prominent place for

children's survival and development. While all Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets aim at creating enabling environments for children to survive and thrive, five of them explicitly relate to young children: they seek to end all forms of poverty, malnutrition, preventable deaths, abuse, exploitation and violence, as well as ensure the provision of access to quality pre-primary education and a legal identity right from birth (United Nations, 2017).

These commitments have been taken at the highest level by world governments and they will without doubt require substantial additional investments, both in terms of financial resources and human capabilities. By 2050, Africa is expected to account for more than half of the world's population growth. Around 42% of the world's births will take place in Africa. By 2100, if current trends persist, around 50% of all the world's children will be African. This growth presents a highly valuable human-capital asset.

This has implications for policy-makers who need to invest in this growing population of children to reap the benefits of this demographic dividend. This in turn will depend on preschool children being developmentally on track, to stay in school, learn and successfully complete their secondary education at the very least. Investing in universal access to quality early childhood development services will be a major step toward achieving this outcome.

Malawi is one of the countries with the most extensive network of ECD centres in Africa. These centres comprise of, among others, community-based childcare centres (CBCCs), pre-schools and day care centres (Yallow, et.al.2012). These ECD centres were established in order to ensure that children in Malawi benefit from such interventions. The emphasis on ECD interventions such as the establishment and running of CBCCs is based on the evidence that exposing children to such programs ensures that they develop their basic skills, attitudes, behaviours and values that will last for their life time (Yallow, et.al.2012). The CBCCs cater for children aged 3–5 years and are managed by members of the community namely parents, guardians, caregivers and community members (Messner & Levy, 2012). The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, with support from UNICEF, has been in the forefront in facilitating the establishment of CBCCs including the training of community volunteer caregivers who take care of the children enrolled in these centres. Apart from the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development, there are also some NGOs that are supporting CBCCs for example through the training of caregivers running these CBCCs, providing play materials and cooking utensils and the construction of CBCC structures. Each CBCC has a CBCC committee which consists of community members who oversee the daily functioning of the Centre (Messner & Levy, 2012).

In the East African region, Tanzania is the leading country with about 34% of children enrolled followed by Kenya with about 28% and Uganda about 14 % children enrolled in ECD (World Bank, 2012). It has been

established that countries in the East African region have unique challenges to the effort to promote holistic ECD for children. Each country has taken a different approach to developing an ECD policy, and the status of policies and choice of institutional anchors varies across the four countries. While the key indicators of children's well-being vary from country to country, across the region, overall levels are quite poor (Neuman & Devecercelli, 2012). The policy is not very clear about the nature support parents and community should provide to enhance the welfare of the ECD centres.

In the context of Kenya, Education development in country has always been through partnership between government, communities, international bilateral and multilateral donors. There is need to strengthen the roles of these partners in order for them to continue playing their roles in provision of educational services thus lessening the government burden on education. It is from this understanding that the school headteacher need to strengthen the relationship between the school and the community of parents, administrators, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOS), churches and sponsors, the MOE and the bodies that support education like Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), Kenya Literature Bureau (KLB), Jomo Kenyatta Foundation (JKF) and Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC). In fact, Olembo et al (1992) calls the headteacher a public relations officer of the school.

According to Otwati (2003), headteachers have overall responsibility over the operations of the school and is accountable to his/her employer, professional, personnel, community and parents on curriculum implementation and supervision, financial management, discipline, personnel management, public relations and physical resources. To, account for and own responsibility on these issues, the headteacher need to call in the advice of others through wide consultations. On this issue, MoEST (1999) observes that an effective headteacher will involve and motivate all stakeholders to contribute to the planning process and to gain ownership in the proposed outcomes.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that the Republic of Kenya (2012) recognizes that for pre-schools be part and parcel of the entire education structure, it is critically important that for the sector to meet their educational objectives by actively involving parents and the community to ensure maximum efficiency. The need for empowering school managers with management skills to be able to mobilize parents and encourage community to improve the quality of service to children need not be overemphasized. Currently, policies involving parents and community in supporting ECD is not very explicit on expected roles of the community. World Bank (2012) laments that the committees are not able to provide adequate support to ECE due to economic hardships and people's attitude towards ECE. It was against this backdrop that information that the study set out to establish the

problems the primary school headteacher experiences in school community relations.

2.0. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study used a descriptive survey design. A descriptive survey design was used to explain or explore the existing status of two or more variables under scrutiny, by enabling the researcher collect original data for the purpose of describing the population which is large to observe directly. Mwimbi Division has a large number of pre-school necessitating a survey sampled preschools to be done (Orodho, 2012; 2017).

2.2. Study Location

The study took place in Mwimbi Division, Meru South County in Eastern Province of Kenya. Meru South County comprises divisions namely; Chuka, Igambang'ombe, Magumoni and Muthambi. In Meru South, Mwimbi is the largest division with three Educational Zones; Chogoria, Kiera and Ganga. The division is inhabited by Meru people with few people from other communities. A bigger proportion of the population engages in subsistence farming with very low income. The researcher chose the division for study because it cuts across different climatic zones ranging from semi-arid area bordering Tharaka to the highlands bordering Mt. Kenya forest. This represents a varied population in terms of material resources. This was assumed to have some impact on pupil enrolment, teacher distribution and retention, finances, type of physical plant and level of community participation in ECE programme all of which are part of the task areas of a headteacher. Finally, the study area was chosen because a study of a similar nature has never been conducted there.

2.3. Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study was based on a sample of 14 pre-schools which comprised of 20% of the target population of 71 pre-schools in the division. Orodho, Nzabaliwa, Odundo, Waweru and Ndayambaje (2016) recommends 20% sample for a small population. Simple random sampling technique was used to obtain the required sample size employing the basket or raffle method to ensure that all the centres have an equal chance of being included in the study. The name of the Centre was written on a piece of paper, all of which were folded into equal and same sizes, put into a container, mixed thoroughly out of which 14 pieces were picked at random. These were the pre-school to be included in the study. From each sample school, the headteacher/manager, one teacher and two parents, who were accessible, were the respondents, giving rise

to 14', headteachers, 14 teachers and 28 parents, resulting to a total of 56 respondents.

2.4. Research Instruments

The study used questionnaires to obtain data from headteachers and teachers and Focus Groups Discussion (FGD) guides from parents. Kothari (2004) defined a research instrument as a tool the researcher uses to collect the data required by the study. Orodho, Nzabaliwa, Odundo, Waweru and Ndayambaje (2016) recommended the use of a variety of data collection instruments to achieve triangulation. The headteachers questionnaire It was relatively easy and cost-effective (in terms of time and money) to construct and administer headteacher's and teacher's questionnaires. The questionnaires contained closed-ended items. Closed-ended items are easier to analyze as they are in immediate usable form (Orodho, Nzabaliwa, Odundo, Waweru & Ndayambaje, 2016).

The parents focus group discussion guideline was also used as recommended by Orodho, Nzabaliwa, Odundo, Waweru and Ndayambaje (2016) who assert that a FGD is a special type of group interview composes of individuals who have been selected because they share certain characteristics, which are relevant to the topic being studied. The study employed the parents FGD Guide as it generated a lot of information quickly and cheaply, it is appropriate in exploring beliefs, ideas or options in a group (parents) rather than an individual. People usually feel comfortable in a FGD, because it is a natural form of communication (Orodho, 2017).

2.3. Pretesting Research Instruments

According to Orodho, Nzabaliwa, Odundo, Waweru and Ndayambaje (2016), instrument piloting is the pre-testing of the instruments to assess their validity and reliability so that items that fail to meet the anticipated data will be discarded or modified accordingly. Pre-testing of the instruments was done before the study in two randomly selected pre-testing centers which were excluded from the study sample. The respondents of the pilot study were one headteacher, 2 teachers and 4 parents. Items that appeared unclear or ambiguous to the respondents were reworded making them clearer. The purpose of pretesting was to establish the validity and reliability of the instruments.

Orodho (2017) defines instrument validity as the extent an instrument measures what it purports to measure. He asserts that, content validity cannot easily be represented numerically, and can best be determined subjectively by a thorough examination of the instrument by experts in the area of research drawn from the Department of Educational Management, Policy and Curriculum Studies, School of Education. The instruments were developed and then handed them over to the experts to establish whether they measured what

they intended to measure. The instruments were modified accordingly in line with the recommendations of the experts.

With regards to reliability of the instruments, Kothari (2004) defines reliability as a measure of the degree to which an instrument yields consistent results or data after repeated trials. The researcher used the split-half method of assessing reliability which required only one testing session. The test involved splitting the data into two halves and finding the reliability between the two halves. Each half was scored independently of the other with the items of the two halves matched on content and difficulty. The split-half method eliminates chance errors likely to affect test-retest method. The instruments were administered to two randomly selected pre-schools in Mwimbi Division after which they were scored. The scored items were divided into two separate halves of even and odd numbers. The total scores of each half were tabulated. A reliability of 0.7 or greater was accepted. According to Orodho (2017), a correlation coefficient of 0.7 for the two halves was considered sufficient

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

A research permit was sought from the National Council for Science Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) before undertaking the field work. The research team made a courtesy call at the county education office. However, two visits were made to the pre-schools/subjects. During the first visit, the research team attempted to strike a rapport with the Headteachers seek their permission to talk to the respondents. The procedure was explained to all of them the purpose of the study with the assurance that the information they would give would be kept confidential, private and anonymous. After issuing to them the instrument, fixed dates were made with headteachers and teachers when to collect the questionnaires. The team requested headteachers to facilitate contact with the parents to be involved in the study and prepare them for discussion.

2.5. Data Analysis

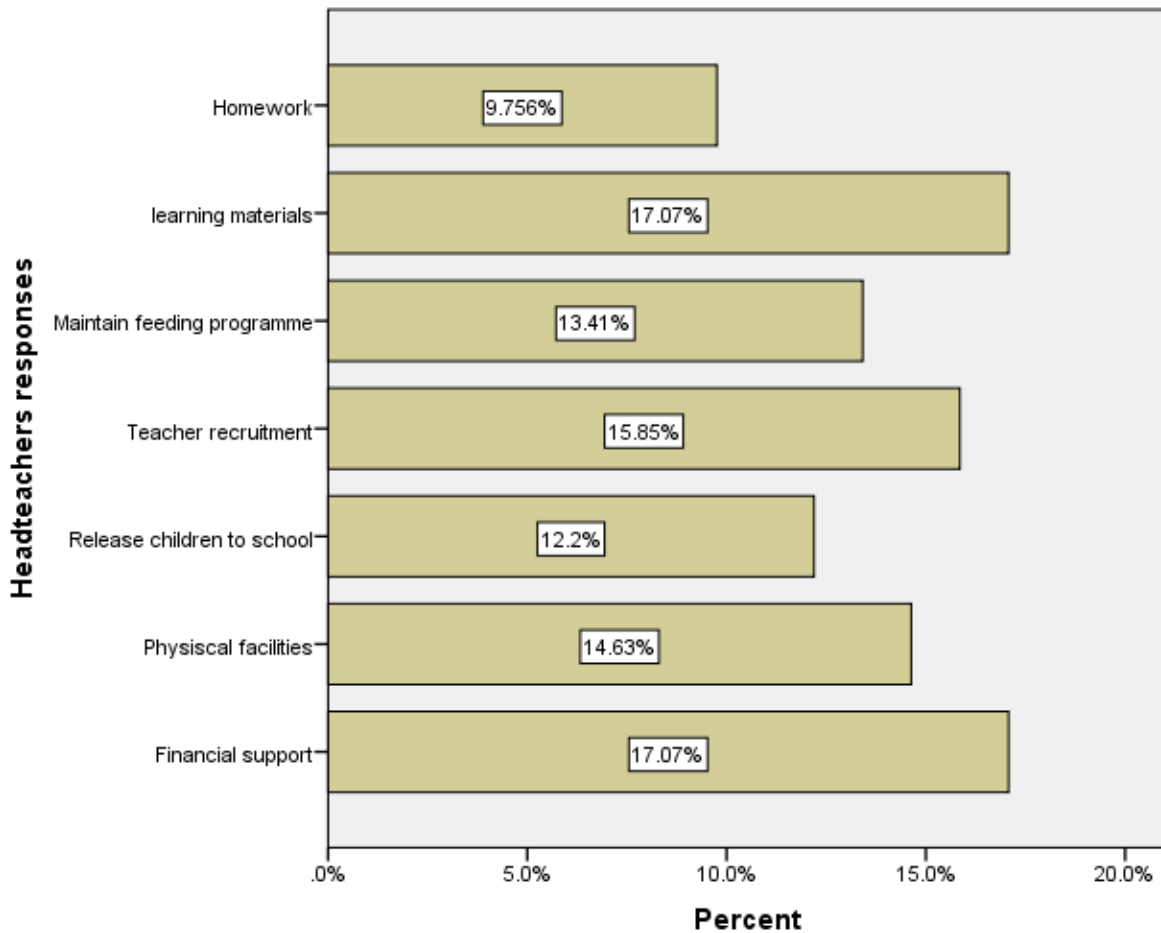
The gathered data were validated, edited and then coded. According to Orodho, Khatete and Mugiraneza (2016), a validation process determines the return rate of questionnaires while editing the instruments determines if they are filled up and whether they have errors. A return rate of at least 70% is acceptable while instruments with more than 40% incomplete respond will be discarded. Data from FGD open-ended items constituting the qualitative data in form of words and phrases were transcribed and then arranged as per emerging themes according to the objectives of study. These data were computed where possible along with data from the structured questionnaire items which consists of quantitative data inform of numerical values. Finally, quantitative data

coding was done whereby categories of responses were identified, classified and then recorded on a prepared sheet as per the objective of study. Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate frequency and percentages and correlation coefficients. The data were presented using tables and graphs accompanied by appropriate explanations.

3.0. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Findings

In an attempt to establish the role of the local community in enhancing the welfare of Early Childhood Centres in the study locale, headteachers were requested to indicate the nature of support they receive from parents as members of the community. Their responses are as exhibited in Figure 1.



An examination of the data in Figure 1 indicates that the community was fairly supportive of the welfare of Early Childhood centers as an equal percentage, constituting 17.0 % were reported to provide learning materials and direct financial support. It was also established that about 15.8% assisted in the recruitment of teachers within the centres. The data in the figure further indicates that headteachers considered about 14.4% and 13.4% of the community participating in putting in place physical facilities and maintaining feeding programmes, respectively. The other areas where the members of the local community offered support were in terms of upholding discipline and also helping in releasing their children on time to attend school.

Correlation between Headteachers and Teachers perceptions on Community Participation

The responses of head teachers and teachers were correlated to establish whether there existed any statistically significant relationship between their perceptions regarding community engagement with Early Childhood Centres. A Pearson's Product Moment correlation coefficient of .976 indicate that there was a strong positive correlation between the views of Headteachers and teachers regarding community.

Table 1: Correlations between headteachers and teachers views on community participation

		Headteachers responses	Teachers responses
Headteachers responses	Pearson Correlation	1	.976**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	82	82
Teachers responses	Pearson Correlation	.976**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	82	82

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Focus group discussions with 28 parents in four sessions indicated that parents were aware of the importance of ECE programme. From one of the FGD sessions, the response was

They reported that ECE is the foundation base for education, ECE helps socialize the child at an early age in terms of language development and interaction and that children who attend pre-school have an advantage over those who do not. These centers are very useful because when children come back home after attending the sessions, they are much improved and can mention important things about life skills.

The foregoing citation indicates that parents value the education of their children at the Early Childhood Centers.

The parents were probed to indicate the exact nature of support they provide to the Early Childhood Centers. The following were some of the captured nature of assistance:

Helping manage the schools through fees payment; Allowing children to attend pre-school; Disciplining the children d. Employing staff ' e.' Helping children grow as responsible citizens; Relating and consulting with ECE staff in the full development of children; Contributing ideas, fiancés and materials toward ECE Centre development.

The parents in one of the focus group discussion fora were requested to indicate how they consider the Early Childhood Centres to have benefitted their children. The following reactions were captured:

Parents reported that their children were keen to attend pre-school because teachers treated them well, and the children enjoyed playing with their peers. However, some failed to attend school due to long distance

between home and pre-school. Most parents described the learning offered at the centres as good, while some complained of teachers being inadequately trained on ECE.

The Headteachers interviewed on some of the constraint's managers experienced in the Early Childhood centres. From the FGD, it was apparent that the following were the main problems that acted as a threat to the management of ECE Centres.

Lack of awareness on the importance of pre-school by some parents. Economic hardships leading to inadequate funding of programmes; Inadequate facilities; Bad mentality by parents that the government should support ECE just like free primary; education; Teachers workload is quite high. Lack of qualified teachers; Poor pay teachers leading to demoralization; amongst others.

Parents as representatives of the community were probed to suggest some strategies to be adopted to alleviate the problem encountered in ECE centres. The parents suggested the following solutions to address the problems encountered in ECE canter's management:

Look for alternative sources of funding; More campaign to be made on ECE; Government to strengthen ECE by being the main sponsor; The community to support the centres; Make ECE compulsory to all those going to class one.

3.2. Discussion of Findings

The study came up with significant findings related to the nature of support of community in the management and enhancement of the welfare of public ECE centres. The study has established that most parents support the ECE centers in several ways including recruitment of teachers. This finding further established that teachers in the ECE centres were

employed by parents, and managed by the ECE committee. The study findings concur with Haddad (2002), who states that although 80 percent of ECE centres are public, they are funded and managed by local parents and communities, and most of the teachers are employed by the parents with low salaries and irregular pay. Haddad (2002) advises that, in order to ensure professionalism, a reasonable and regular salary should be provided for the teachers, especially after they have been trained and certified.

The study established that the community supported ECE centres through finances, building of physical facilities, releasing children to attend school, deploying ECE staff, initiating and maintaining ECE feeding programme, helping children to develop learning materials, follow-up on progress of pupils, and upholding pre-school discipline. Although the overall management and coordination of ECE programmes at the national level is the responsibility of an inter-sectoral committee referred to as the Project Management Support Group (PMSG), it emerges that the government does very little in terms of supporting the ECE programme. The current devolved system to county level has shifted management of ECE to County Government. This shift now fills the gap in the earlier Education and Training Act which is a policy framework that directs the Ministry of Education's provision of ECE is the Partnership Policy, first stipulated in the Sessional Paper No. 6 of 1988 and the National Development Plan of 1989/1993. The Partnership Policy aims to enhance the involvement of various partners in the provision of ECD services (Ministry of Education, 2005).

4.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The thrust of this study was to establish the role of communities in supporting the development of Early Childhood centers in the study locale. The study has established that communities are involved in the development and management of ECE centres in several ways including both financial and non-financial forms. However, it was further established that the level of participation was still lower than expected. The parents seemed to be willing but were constrained by their low socio-economic status and higher prevalence of poverty.

From the foregoing, it was recommended that:

1. Parents should take keen interest on the education of their children in ECE centers just as in the other levels of education. The parents could be enabled and sensitized to:
 - a. Supervise work done by their children daily
 - b. Pay the levies in good time
 - c. Give ideas on how to improve the centres
 - d. Give enough support to the headteachers and teachers on matters concerning their children's discipline.

2. The community should:
 - a. Strengthen their financial support for ECE Centre's.
 - b. Hold meetings to strategize on improving the facilities for ECE Centre's
 - c. Voice their grievances to the government so that more support of channeled towards ECE, for example, finances and employment teachers.
3. The government should:
 - a) Streamline ECE management by appointing a teacher to oversee the running who could then report directly to primary school headteacher.
 - b) Put in some reasonable financial aid on this Sector as many of the facilities on use are outdated.
 - c) Advise the Quality Assurance Officers to take time to also oversee the management of ECE centres.
 - d) Sensitize the community on the need of ECE.

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