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Preschool Education in Finland and Kenya: A Comparison within Perspectives of Educational Quality

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Abstract: Kenya adopted the Competency-Based Curriculum in 2017, and it is in the process of implementation for the rest of the classes. There has been concern among educational stakeholders on the best way forward. This system of education in terms of structure is very similar to the Finnish System of Education. We investigate the educational quality of the two countries to compare their different educational systems. Following the introduction, the theoretical aspects of quality standardization are presented. This is followed by Finnish perspectives on quality assessment and, later, Kenya's perspectives. The salient features of Kenyan and Finnish educational systems are compared from a quality perspective. Then, we summarize what Kenya and Finland can learn from each other. To remain on the Competency-Based Curriculum path, Kenya has much to learn from the Finnish Educational System, especially teacher quality, instruction, assessment of learning outcomes, school climate, and student support.

Keywords: Standards, Quality, Assessment, Preschool Education, Competency-Based Curriculum

Introduction

There is a growing consensus among researchers that high-quality education for children can contribute immensely to their future academic success, brain development, health outcomes, and overall national economic growth (Black et al. 2017). The World's Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 advocates that all children should have access to quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE) by 2030 (UN, n.d.). In parallel, the World Bank and UNICEF are encouraging developing countries such as Kenya to expand the Basic Education provision and improve their service quality (UNICEF 2012). This international focus on education advocates for the following principles: (1) identifying quality standardization processes; (2) identifying the characteristics of national education systems; (3) expanding access to early childhood education, and (4) strengthening the transnational education sector (Ritzer 2007).

High-quality ECE enhances school readiness, school achievement, and success in life (Burchinal 2018; Eisenberg, Spinrad, and Eggum 2010; Snow 2006). Although accepted in international circles as necessary, quality is treated differently in different countries. According to OECD (2012), frantic efforts have been made to develop a tool to assess ECE quality with minimal success because there are no strict definitions of quality since it is value and culturally based. The value and culture of a community significantly contribute to what their quality standard will be; therefore, this definition may vary slightly from country to country (Kamerman 2001). ECE quality's modern definition is based on two models: process and structural quality (Burchinal 2018). Process quality emphasizes the child's experience and sensitive interaction with teachers, such as classroom management and instructional support (Hamre 2014). However, global measures on ECE quality focus more on structural quality and create a certain amount of confusion on whether to address the child-teacher relationship or child outcomes (Burchinal et al. 2015; Burchinal 2018). We present a description of education quality and its assessment processes from Finnish and Kenyan perspectives. We list similarities and differences from which we offer suggestions for policy, research, and practice. This information can give stakeholders an

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understanding of basic education in high-income and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), such as Kenya, and the gap that needs to be filled to increase sociopolitical outcomes (Józsa, Török, and Stevenson 2018). This study is the culmination of an academic exchange program where a Finnish professor visited the Institute of Education at the University of Szeged in Hungary, and the author is a postgraduate researcher. These meetings provided an avenue to discuss educational quality and assessment features that affect both educational systems in early childhood and elementary education. We will attempt to answer the following research questions: (i) What is quality standardization in preschool and elementary education? and (ii) How do Finland and Kenya assess and monitor quality in their education systems?

Quality Standardization

In education, standards refer to formulations of expectations. It can also mean the agreed-upon quality criteria for particular objects, such as teaching, assessments, services, and staff (Kane 2016), whereas standard setting refers to the implementation of procedures to identify points or intervals along a scale designed to measure student achievement within a specified domain (Gustafsson 2017). In what follows, the associated verbal descriptions of these points or discrete levels along the range are treated as parts of the standard-setting procedure (Olsen and Nilsen 2016). There are four stages in the standard setting. These are: (1) to define the outcome objectives for each discipline (standards) and define the tasks that students need to achieve in each standard; (2) to aggregate the standards and qualitatively decide what is sufficient; (3) to construct a test consisting of a certain number of items for each standard; and (4) to decide which performance is acceptable (Wilson and Santelices 2016). However, ECE quality models are guided by socioecological, attachment, and learning theories (Burchinal 2018). The socioecological theory insists that the quality of the relationship between the caregiver and the child is critical since it determines the level of engagement leading to cognitive skills development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). On the other hand, attachment theory suggests that frequent, consistent, and sensitive interactions promote socioemotional adjustment and positive approaches to learning (Ainsworth 1989). Based on these theories, two models are used to explain ECE quality: structural and process quality. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the question of quality in ECE is not well defined for structural and process quality (Burchinal 2018). Furthermore, robustly differentiating and quantifying ECE systems capacity and output is a challenge. This situation is exacerbated by different stakeholders giving different opinions about quality. For instance, parents might want a peaceful and accessible place for children, and teachers are interested in career advancement, while the government might focus on children getting prerequisite competencies (Józsa, Török, and Stevenson 2018).

Structural quality in education is elucidated based on staff education, qualifications, and training; child-staff ratio; group size; staff wages; parent and community involvement; political support and public funding; coordinated infrastructure; program administration and management; and monitoring the education sector (OECD 2010). With this realization, the study of quality standardization in education has become an essential topic in educational effectiveness. This field addresses educational quality in terms of teacher quality, instructional quality, school climate, and learner outcomes—both cognitive and affective (Ladd and Sorensen 2017; Nilsen and Gustafsson 2016). For example, in Ethiopia, parents associate ECE quality with children's English and Amharic abilities (Dighe and Seiden 2020), similar to Kenya, where English and Swahili are preferred (Mose 2015). However, one of the challenges facing educational systems worldwide is teacher quality and equal distribution (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2006). Goe (2007) defines teacher quality as a combination of both teacher characteristics (inputs) and qualifications that influence their instruction (process) and student outcomes (e.g., achievement and motivation). However, policymakers have associated teacher quality with a sense of teaching efficacy, teaching experience, and subject matter expertise (Schleicher 2012). Researchers have also demonstrated the relationship between teacher quality and the gap in academic performance (Akiba and Liang 2014). Instructional quality is based

on three global dimensions of classroom process quality, namely cognitive activation, a supportive climate, and classroom management (Hamre 2014; Lipowsky et al. 2009). Academic climate addresses the overall quality of the academic atmosphere, including emotional safety and ambition for success (Wang and Degol 2016). To assess structural quality, researchers have focused on the effect size of structural quality factors, such as higher levels of teacher education, lower student-teacher ratio, in-service training, and a supportive program administration (Burchinal 2018).

In Malta, two thousand parents were asked to define quality in ECE; in the context of Malta, quality in ECE refers to practitioner characteristics, such as love toward children, happiness, the relationship between family and setting, physical development, and children welfare (Sollars 2020). These characteristics are closely associated with process quality. In ECE, process quality is widely assessed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre 2008), and it assesses the sensitive interaction between teachers and children. The CLASS is based on a framework that places the intricate relationship between teachers and students into three domains: instructional support, classroom organization, and emotional support. Instructional support is operationalized to measure behaviors such as procedures and skills, analysis and problem-solving abilities, and feedback quality. Classroom organization assesses behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning formats. Lastly, emotional support assesses teacher sensitivity, positive and negative climate, and their regard for learner perspectives. These dimensions of teacher-child interactions are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high) (Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre 2008). The other one is the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales (ECERS-R; ECERS-3; Harms, Clifford, and Cryer 2005), which is usually administered in the morning to assess the overall class quality. The measure has seven subscales, namely personal care routines (six items), activities (ten items), language-reasoning (four items), interaction (five items), program structure (four items), as well as the staff and parents (six items). The subscales are scored from 1 (inadequate) to 7 (excellent). The average of the seven subscale scores gives the ECERS-R score. Uniquely, ECERS-R has two components that can also assess structural quality (i.e., program structure, staff, and parents). Another tool gaining popularity in-process quality assessment is the situational judgment questions (SJQ; OECD 2018). The SJQ evaluates characteristics that support child-directed play, prosocial behavior, and conflict management. In summary, the child-caregiver interaction is the hallmark of quality ECE practices (Bohan-Baker and Little 2002; Helmerhorst et al. 2014; Mashburn and Pianta 2006). Next, we will describe the preschool and elementary education available in Finland and how quality standards are maintained.

Preschool and Elementary Education in Finland

Finland's geographical land is vast with a small population (Table 1), and this presents challenges for preschool and elementary school organizations (Kalaoja and Pietarinen 2009). Therefore, the term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) includes "all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or program content" (OECD 2015, 19). In this regard, there are five types of ECCE for zero- to six-year-olds, namely group family daycare, ECE centers, open ECE settings, and pre-primary education for six-year-olds. Children join the school at the age of seven years (Vainikainen et al. 2017), and gross enrollment is estimated at 100.39 percent (see Table 1). Preschool education for six-year-olds became a subjective right for all children in 2001 (Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen 2009). Elementary education lasts six years before proceeding to junior secondary for three years (National Board of Education 1999; Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). The difference between one school and the next in Finland is one of the smallest globally, with a repetition rate of 0.27 percent compared to Kenya's 3 percent (Table 1). This is stipulated in the Basic Education Act of 1968, which was revised in 2011 to give the municipalities the power to run schools and ensure equity (Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg 2006). During this time, an attempt to standardize education failed (Thuneberg et al. 2013) and followed a local curriculum supervised by the National Core

Curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). In the 1980s and 90s, municipalities were allowed to design their curriculum based on the core curriculum, from which they select their textbooks. It is during this period that school inspections were stopped (Vainikainen 2014). The Finnish Education system is based on a foundation of ethos, as stipulated by the National Board of Education (National Board of Education 1999). The ethos provides for a learning culture that is built on trust. There is a high standard of education for all and a highly empowered and trained teaching profession. Other supportive ethos include early intervention, individualized approach, students' active role, good student-teacher relationships, and encouraging feedback (Vainikainen et al. 2015). In 2015, PISA results show that the Finnish students' performance in science, mathematics, and problem-solving were among the highest in the PISA participating countries (OECD 2017). In 2018, Finland was ranked seventh after Canada, reporting a significant drop in the rankings, while their neighbor Estonia improved dramatically (OECD 2018).

The expansive Finnish area with massive forest cover has prioritized small rural schools next to the villages (Kalaoja and Pietarinen 2009). These schools take advantage of the forest cover and prioritize environmental education in three dimensions: learning from the environment, learning in the environment, and acting for the environment (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). Due to urbanization, the Ministry of Environment recommended that the distance between a daycare center and a forest should not be more than 300 meters. Such forests are referred to as 'school forests' and provide a learning environment for different subjects, diversity of nature, and promote the health and wellbeing of children. Such forest preschools allow their learners to explore nature throughout the year regardless of the weather (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019).

Table 1: Quality Indicators of Preschool Education in Kenya and Finland

Indicator	Kenya	Finland
Land size	580367km^2	340000km^2
Population	47,564,296	5,545,082
Government expenditure on education (% of GDP)	5.31	6.84
Government expenditure on education in US$ (millions)	3,496.818	17,183.58
Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) %	104.21	100.39
School life expectancy (years)	2.23	3.296
Repetition rate in primary (%)	3.25	0.2675
Percentage of preschool teachers who are female (%)	81.09	97.36
Official entrance age to early childhood education (years)	3	1

Note: Data averaged for each country from 2014 to 2018 and extracted on November 19, 2020
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.

Overview of Preschool Education Quality Monitoring in Finland

Although ECE is integrated at the national level, municipalities that monitor grassroots levels manage general operations. Municipalities and all public and private ECE settings must adopt and adapt the national curriculum framework and guidelines (OECD 2016). Educational assessment and evaluation are carried out at three levels: the system, school or local, and student level. At the system level, educational assessment aims to monitor how the system responds to student learning and its usefulness in school development. The local-level assessment addresses both the curriculum implementation and learning assessment, which can help develop practices based on identified needs (National Board of Education 1999).

Assessment of Learner Outcomes

According to the OECD (2015), the purpose for assessment and monitoring of child outcomes indicators in Finland are the following: identifying learning needs for children, enhancing child development, improving the level of service quality, improving staff performance, informing policy-making, identifying learning needs for staff, informing the general public, and accountability purposes. In Finland, whenever a problem is identified in ECE settings, an inspection is initiated at

the regional or municipality level. This may be external or internal. For example, early childhood skills are assessed using direct assessments, observations, and narratives. These skills include motor, socioemotional, language, literacy, numeracy, creativity, autonomy, wellbeing, healthy development, practical skills, science, and ICT skills. However, Finland does not have a specific document or program to assess school readiness like their neighbor, Norway (OECD 2015).

Finnish children are also allowed to present their assessment of ECE settings to the education authority. Child assessment reports are provided using narrative assessments (storytelling and portfolios) and observational tools (rating scales and checklist), although individual settings and municipalities determine the tools used in practice. Direct assessments, especially test and screening exams, are not used since Finland does not have national examination settings. A team of evaluators interview children across the country on what they like or dislike to get the best representation of what children would like to have in ECE. Children are given cameras to take pictures of what they like and dislike. They are also asked to draw in their books some of these descriptions (OECD 2016).

According to the Core Curriculum for basic education, the emphasis is laid on formative assessment to provide feedback to students and parents. Formative assessment gives the student feedback toward a common goal. The feedback is given individually and agreed upon between the teacher and the learner (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). It also helps the teacher to identify what the learner requires for learning. This form of feedback provides an opportunity for the learner to know when they are doing well, but failure is also part of the learning process. Pupils are also encouraged to learn from a team of peers and give constructive feedback to each other and the teacher. Over time, students learn self-assessment skills and peer assessment. A summative assessment is performed to assess what the student has learned. The outcome is graded on a scale between 4 and 10, especially for grades 8 and 9. No competition is allowed since there are no national tests (National Board of Education 1999).

Assessment of Instructional Quality

In ECE, service quality is monitored using checklists, parental surveys, and rating scales. The outcome of service inspections is published at the local level and is officially made public. In Finland and Norway, licenses can be revoked and services closed if an ECE setting drastically underperforms continuously (OECD 2016). Since there are no high-stakes exams, the individual teacher is given full responsibility and flexibility to assess and give individual learners feedback on whether they are meeting the national core curriculum's objectives. Here, there are no minimum or maximum standards. In this regard, there are no assessments that relate to learners' or teachers' accountability (Table 2). School inspection and textbook inspection have also been abolished (Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg 2006). Although Finland has achieved equity in education programs, teaching and learning are highly differentiated. In terms of teaching, equity does not mean the same for all; there is differentiation based on goals, learning time, material adaptation, and organization of learning situations (Harker and Tymms 2004). Unlike many countries where compulsory national exams are demanded for central policy decision-making, Finland relies on sample-based assessments usually made by the central system. The sampling procedure for curriculum subjects to be sampled and assessed resembles PISA exams (OECD 2014). By the 1990s, Finland had identified the significance of twenty-first-century skills, such as learning to learn skills, and realized that thinking skills form an essential component of its measurement (Hautamäki et al. 2002). Learning to learn is a cognitive competency, along with the disposition to adopt new tasks in new learning (Hautamäki, Hautamäki, and Kupiainen 2010). For this reason, the Finns adopted major international frameworks, such as the Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo); Competencies for Lifelong Learning Recommendation; the European Parliament; and the Council of Europe. Also, digital competence is enhanced in all subjects (Søby 2015; Vainikainen et al. 2015).

Apart from curricular assessments, the national agency also assesses thematic curricular areas like learning (Vainikainen et al. 2015) and the National Educational Evaluation Centre assesses international assessments, PISA, TIMMS, and PIRLS. The research institutions and universities handle the remaining thematic areas after being contracted by the Ministry of Education (Hautamäki et al. 2013).

Academic Climate

Schools are supported by a school welfare group composed of the special education teacher, school psychologist, social worker, school nurse, and the teacher of the pupil/class in question (Vainikainen 2014). All pupils have access to a special education teacher who acts as a consultant for the class and subject teachers (Thuneberg et al. 2013). Several methods are used to screen student needs, including teacher observation, tests by special needs teachers, curriculum-based school tests, the screening of necessary skills, parents' interviews, tests by school psychologists, student's self-evaluation, medical examination, and other methods developed by the school (Vainikainen et al. 2015).

Table 2: Summary of Kenya, Finland, and General European Education Models

	Kenya Model	*Finland Model*	*General European Model*
Structure of Early Childhood Education	Pre-primary—2 years Primary—6 years (Join when 6 years old)	Pre-primary—1 year Primary—6 years (Join when 7 years old)	
Standardization	Follow standard guidelines for schools, teachers, and students Centralized curriculum developed by KICD	Diversity and Flexibility provided. Curriculum developed based on school needs that provide information and support	Strict standards for students, teachers, and schools to guarantee the outcome quality
Emphasis	Emphasis on literacy and numeracy (old curriculum). CBC focus is on the holistic development of the child	Emphasis on broad knowledge and equal value to all aspects of an individual's development	Emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Necessary skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science as prime targets of education reform
Accountability	Consequential evaluation; accountability by inspection	Based on the trust that teachers are professionals and know what is best for students and report progress.	Consequential accountability; evaluation by inspection.

Note: KICD—Kenya Institute of Education; CBC—Competency Based Curriculum
Source: Kupiannen et al. 2009; KICD 2016a

Finland utilizes a three-tier model to support learners in various classes (National Board of Education 2004). The model emphasizes the local schools' flexibility in decision-making and shared teaching (Thuneberg et al. 2014). In tier 1, the student is provided with general support whenever a need arises, which is a temporary measure. This can be conducted at the school or class level by differentiation, remedial teaching, and part-time special education (Thuneberg et al. 2013). No decisions or official documents are required for this. If the general support offered in tier 1 fails, a multi-collaboration team is assigned to intensify the general support with multiple interventions that follow an individualized intervention plan. These students can be placed in slightly smaller classes (Hienonen et al. 2018). If tier 2 was not successful, another multi-professional team is assigned that defines an appropriate individualized intervention for such students. Drastic decisions are made, and the students are placed in special education classes that have fewer students. Such students remain in the regular classes unless it is impossible to maintain them in such classes (Vainikainen, Hienonen, and Hotulainen 2017). Due to the high level of differentiation during instruction, remedial instruction and welfare needs are also provided for learners who need extra time to learn, usually if they were absent due to illness or difficulties in the subject area (Kupiainen, Hautamäki, and Karjalainen 2009). Remedial teaching can be preventive, especially when a difficult topic is anticipated.

Students are reorganized once in grade 2 and remain in the same group until grade 6 unless they choose other specialized languages starting in grade 2. The average class size is eighteen for grade 2, and this increases to twenty in grade 6. Two-thirds of tier-2 students study in regular classes of between sixteen to twenty-nine students, while half of the tier-3 students are placed in regular classes with fewer than sixteen students (Vainikainen, Hienonen, and Hotulainen 2017). Moreover, a cross-sectoral team, including the psychologist, teaching staff, and social workers, allocate pupils to student welfare work covering much of the non-teaching-related work done in the school. Finland also provides enhanced technology-based feedback for parents and pupils. Although there is no specific guideline on utilizing technology-enhanced feedback, this has contributed significantly to improving parent-teacher collaboration. This is extremely useful in supporting the affected pupils' teaching and learning (Oinas, Vainikainen, and Hotulainen 2017). The literature is full of examples of how the facilitation of feedback to learners can positively affect learning and improve teacher-parent collaboration (O'Rourke et al. 2016).

Teacher or Staff Quality

The Finnish teacher education system is comprehensive, and it is based on (i) research; (ii) diagnosing students with learning challenges and adapting to learners' needs; (iii) pedagogical content knowledge; and (iv) a clinical component (Schleicher 2012; Toom et al. 2010). The minimum qualification is set at the master's level for primary teachers and the bachelor's level for early childhood teachers (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen 2011). In the annual bargain contracts with the teacher unions, they insist on in-service training to enhance teacher performance. Since the teachers are well trained to the master's level, the municipalities and society have placed a lot of trust in them (Schleicher 2012; Søby 2015). Also, renewing the educational norms and guidelines is a joint enterprise.

Furthermore, there is close cooperation between teachers, teacher unions, parents, schools, and municipalities brought together by the Board of Education that operates at the national level (National Board of Education 1999). School leaders only employ teachers if they can realize their objectives and goals to achieve optimization (Isorè 2009). Since quality criteria are used as a recommendation, not as a norm, to establish what is happening in the education system, sample-based evaluations are used. The most commonly used tool for staff quality assessment in Finland is self-evaluation reports (Schleicher 2012). Staff performance is monitored using inspections and self-evaluations. The inspections check staff qualifications, teamwork, communication among staff, working conditions, and knowledge of their subject (OECD 2016).

Despite these valuable strategies for maintaining quality, Finland also faces some monitoring challenges. Firstly, there is no shared perspective of quality, and therefore, every municipality has its guidelines. This makes it hard to adopt a common national standard. Secondly, there is no national monitoring system as regional bodies assume this responsibility. Lastly, there is no organized training for internal and external evaluators. Such training is critical because they help improve and maintain quality (Waterman et al. 2012).

Preschool and Elementary Education in Kenya

Kenya's education system is currently under transition from the former 8-4-4 System of Education to the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). The National Sessional paper 2 of 2015 recommended revising the educational system and introducing the new CBC (Republic of Kenya 2015). This curriculum requires that children be enrolled in pre-primary one at four years of age, then proceed to pre-primary two and join formal schooling at the age of six (see Table 2). Primary schooling will take six years, junior and senior secondary will take six years, and university will take three years (KICD 2016b). Rather than focusing too much on content mastery, it is envisaged that CBC will focus on the child's holistic development. This is

supported by other local legal documents that support Kenya's quality education, including the Constitution of Kenya revised in 2010 and the Basic Education Act of 2013. Just like in Finland, Kenya has classified child grouping in early childhood into playgroup (half to two years old); baby class (three years old); four years (pre-primary 1); five years (Pre-Primary II); and six to eight years (grade I to III, respectively). Children below four years either remain at home or attend baby classes. To conform with the National Early Childhood Policy (2015), the term Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) refers to services offered to children aged between zero to eight years in Kenya.

In arid and semi-arid areas, there is a big difference between home and school environments. Since parents move from one region to the other in search of pasture, this makes schooling a challenge (Ng'asike 2014). The government has introduced mobile schools as a non-formal education approach (Ngugi 2016). These schools lack teachers and possess inadequate classes and instructional materials. Similar observations have also been made in urban slums and informal settlements, where school programs are not regular as students are involved in income-generating activities to support their families. Schools in these informal settlements are dilapidated, and classes are sometimes taught by volunteers (Hussein 2021). The government or private individuals own the majority of schools in other parts of the country. In urban areas, such as huge cities like Nairobi and Mombasa, students mainly attend private schools because they are better equipped and provide means of transport to school. Despite this, most students attend public schools (Piper, Merseth, and Ngaruiya 2018).

Instructional Quality Monitoring in Kenya

The Constitution of Kenya article 53 provides for compulsory primary education (Republic of Kenya 2010). Therefore, ECDE is devolved to the county level, while the central government manages primary, secondary, and university education. Hence, the operationalization and implementation of policies in ECDE are mandated to the forty-seven county governments in the country. The question of quality and relevance has been a challenge in Kenya. According to the National Pre-Primary Education Policy, quality education is affected by learning environments, inappropriate curriculum delivery methods, inadequate teaching and learning materials, inadequate supervision and monitoring of curriculum delivery, low teacher motivation, low economic growth and high teacher attrition (Republic of Kenya 2017). Before implementing the New Constitution, the ECDE sector was under the Ministry of Education, where the directorate of quality assurance was in charge. Service monitoring in ECDE was guided by the ECD Service Standard Guidelines (MOE 2006). The Standard Guidelines stipulate all the standards for children's services, quality and inclusive ECDE services, management, supervision, and ECDE programs' accountability; this document also stipulates how monitoring and evaluation should be carried out (MOE 2006). All the rubrics required for the assessment of services are also given in this document. The document mandates the directorate to do the following, among many other duties: (1) assess ECDE centers attached to or detached from the primary school regularly; (2) make document quality assurance reports and disseminate these reports to the stakeholders after carrying out a quality assessment; (3) assess play equipment to ensure the safety of ECDE children; and (4) establish and enforce standards of the school readiness program (MOE 2006). After the promulgation of the New Constitution in 2010, this task went to the county government as stipulated by the County Early Education Act 2018 (Republic of Kenya 2018). This act gives the county government the mandate to recruit, train, manage, and maintain the quality of ECDE within their jurisdiction. The act created a County Early Childhood Quality Assurance Committee that will monitor, evaluate, and ensure the quality of ECDE according to the national standards developed by the Education, Standards, and Quality Assurance Council.

Teacher Quality

The County Early Education Act 2018 empowers the county government to employ and train teachers under their jurisdiction to maintain quality (MOE 2018). The Act also enabled the establishment of National Pre-Primary Education Policy Standard Guidelines that revised the Service Standard Guidelines of 2006. Like its predecessor, the 2018 Service Standard Guidelines also provide all the rubrics needed to monitor teacher quality. All teaching—from primary schools to teacher training institutes—is managed by the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) (Republic of Kenya 2018). The constitution mandates TSC under article 237(2) to (1) register trained teachers; (2) recruit and employ registered teachers; (3) assign teachers to schools; and (4) promote and discipline teachers, among others (Republic of Kenya 2010). In administering its duties, TSC liaises closely with the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Standards (DQUASO) to assess teacher quality. DQUASO is entrusted with the development of standards in all schools, and it must ensure that they are adhered to in service delivery. Teacher quality in Kenya has also been linked with the results the teacher posted in the national exams. This approach is challenging because (i) tests are designed for learners not teachers, (ii) it is difficult to sort out classroom from teacher effects, and (iii) it is hard to get student-teacher data that result in student achievement test scores (Goe 2007).

The new CBC emphasizes integrating twenty-first-century skills: communication and collaboration; self-efficacy; critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and imagination; citizenship; digital literacy; and learning to learn (KICD 2016b). The main challenge is its assessment. A study carried out by Mbaka (2014) in Kenya on the assessment and teaching of twenty-first-century skills found that Kenyan teachers are not competent in how these skills can be assessed, and he recommended that teachers be retrained to make them proficient in these competencies. Teacher training colleges and universities offer teacher training in Kenya. Minimum qualification for Early childhood and primary school teachers is a three-year diploma training from the colleges, while universities offer degree programs according to the new curriculum reforms (KICD 2016a).

Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Due to the lack of a standardized assessment test, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) developed the Early Childhood Development and Education Progress Assessment Tool for formative assessment at all levels of ECDE. Using its results, the children will be enrolled in grade 1 in a primary school. As an intervention to this low-quality service delivery, in 2015, the Ministry of Education launched the Kenya School Readiness Assessment Tool (KSRAT) (Republic of Kenya 2017). The tool assesses the following competencies: language and literacy; mathematical thinking; scientific thinking; physical; creative art; social-emotional and general knowledge; life skills; music and movement; spirituality and morals; and child wellbeing (Republic of Kenya 2017). However, KSRAT does not assess motivation, executive functions, nor approaches to learning that are critical in school readiness assessments (Amukune and Józsa 2021; Li, Fan and Jin 2019). This rating is not meant to deny any child access to primary school in grade 1. Furthermore, it is envisaged that this assessment will be extremely important for both teachers, learners, and other educational stakeholders (MOEST 2015).

One of the cornerstones of assessing quality in Kenyan primary schools is the candidates' performance in the national exams. These high-stake exams facilitate crucial decisions about the child (Republic of Kenya 2017). Schools with students that perform well in the national exam are assumed to offer high-quality education regardless of how they managed to achieve these results. This has mostly been in favor of private than public schools in both numeracy and literacy (Piper, King, and Mugenda 2016). The transition from one class to the other is also determined by student performance in the midterm and end-term exams.

School Climate

Students with special needs are first assessed and placed in special schools built next to primary schools or integrated with others. The new curriculum advocates integration, but a shortage of specialized teachers makes it necessary for children to be sent to particular institutions (KICD 2016b). Students with learning difficulties face many challenges depending on the school. Those in private schools can receive some attention since the student numbers are manageable. Unfortunately, those in public schools, due to large numbers and no specialized teachers, become extremely difficult to maintain. Indeed, it is mostly secondary schools where teachers with counseling responsibility are available, not primary schools. Although most primary schools do not have teachers who provide other services, such as guidance and counseling, nursing, and special needs, few teachers volunteer to take on these responsibilities.

Discussion

One of the critical outcomes of ECE that is emphasized when children are joining school is age. In the Finnish system, children are ready to join school at seven years, and in Kenya, they join at six years. School readiness has been studied for many years, but to date, questions still emerge like "What does it mean to be school ready?" (Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos 2004; Stein et al. 2019). Researchers view school readiness as a process influenced by different systems, such as child peers, family, school, and community readiness (UNICEF 2012). Therefore, age is not the only requirement for school readiness. Both Kenya and Finland need to consider the readiness of other critical stakeholders during the transition to school. Also, many tools are used to assess a child's readiness for a school that require trained examiners, who are not always available in sub-Saharan African countries like Kenya, to administer. To fill this gap, we have been developing an android-based app that is easy to administer without training called Finding Out Children's Unique Skills (FOCUS) in Kenya (Amukune et al. 2021). In Finland, special tools are used under a school psychologist's advice (Vainikainen, Hienonen, and Hotulainen 2017). Also, preschools and primary schools are very different in Kenya in terms of instruction and management. This creates confusion, especially during the transition to school, leading to low academic achievement (Wamaitha 2013; Uwezo 2016; Republic of Kenya 2017). In contrast to Finland, where there is a school psychologist available to identify particular learners with special needs, in every district in Kenya, there is one assessment center. This, though helpful, still does not provide sufficient information for differentiated teaching (Mutisya 2010).

The use of ICT in Finland to provide feedback to parents and teachers is also encouraging, and it ensures that both environments at home and school are balanced (Oinas, Vainikainen, and Hotulainen 2017). In Kenya, there is an upcoming trend for every class to have a WhatsApp or Facebook group. Unfortunately, this is not individualized, and it cannot be used to give personalized assistance. The other ICT infrastructure is a database called the National Education Management Information System (NEMIS), which is used to enroll and track learners' performance from one class or school to the next. It is used solely for official schools' management by the government, and due to a myriad of challenges, most schools have yet to adopt it fully (Mwadulo and Odoyo 2020). Nevertheless, studies have revealed that feedback can play a role of informative and motivation depending on the leaner's goals (Tricomi and DePasque 2016).

Kenya's schools differ significantly from one neighborhood to the other and from public to private schools. Schools in slums experience excessive demand, leading to poor use of available resources, which contributes to poor quality education (Dixon, Tooley, and Schagen 2013). There is a need to deliberate on a sustainable funding policy in Kenya due to the increasing demand for ECE (Republic of Kenya 2017). This may be supported by deliberate government legislation that can ensure the equity of schools within a county. In arid and semi-arid lands, the curriculum is different from the learners' environment, which creates a barrier to learning (Ng'asike 2014).

Finnish preschools have adopted the forest as a teaching resource (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). This is closer to Kenya's thematic teaching approach, where it can adapt to the forest or the ocean as the central theme to support different learning areas for a day (KICD 2016b).

In Kenya, the teacher unions' role is to negotiate salaries, while in Finland; it is mostly to bridge the gap between the unions, parents, schools, and the employer (Schleicher 2012). Additionally, the primary teacher union, the Kenya National Union of Teachers, faces several challenges such as finance, declining membership, and political interference that have affected its operations (Anyango et al. 2019). Nevertheless, no union represents the preschool teachers. There is also great acrimony between teacher unions and employers, leading to disruptions of the school calendar. The unions in Finland negotiate for professional development for their members, not necessarily money. Regarding teacher evaluation in Kenya, it is mainly done by the Ministry of Education and TSC, with minimal self-evaluations. Does this mean that Kenyan society does not trust the teachers to evaluate themselves? Furthermore, does this mean that the quality of training is in doubt?

Kenya's curriculum has no predefined number of years for it to remain operational like that of Finland. The change of political regimes has a significant effect on the curriculum, and sometimes, there is a total overhaul. For example, despite the public outcry for the 8-4-4 curriculum to be revised, it remained the same until the new regime came to power on the platform of curriculum reforms in 2017 (Republic of Kenya 2017), and it started the implementation processes. This, for the first time, introduced the integration of twenty-first-century skills into the curriculum, which was initiated much earlier in Finland. Comparing the two countries in terms of quality assessment, Finland has a more significant focus on process quality than Kenya. It is also imperative to identify the correct causal links that lead to increased child outcomes in ECE. Structural quality leads to process quality and enhanced child outcomes (Burchinal 2018). It is critically important for educational systems to lay proper structures that will sustain process quality. This comparative analysis has one possible limitation. Educational quality is affected by other extraneous variables that are beyond the education system. For instance, economic growth and politics in Kenya and Finland are very different. The Finnish GDP and proportion of expenditure on education are much bigger than in Kenya. These two variables, either directly or indirectly, affect education quality.

Conclusion

The new CBC under implementation in Kenya has introduced a curriculum closely resembling the Finnish Education System. Therefore, it is crucial that, as Kenya follows the path, they should note the Finnish system's qualities on educational assessment, teacher quality, instructional quality, school climate, and quality monitoring. A model that assesses both processes and structural quality is ideal. For a long time, the Kenyan system has relied on examination performance as a benchmark for quality. Learners were taken through rote learning and mastery of content rather than skills and other twenty-first-century competencies to achieve excellent results. CBC requires a paradigm shift from content mastery to the holistic development of the learner. This shift can focus on child-teacher interactions, monitor progress made by children in skills acquisition, engage parents, and improve quality instruction. To this end, schools need facilities and professionally trained teachers on CBC. Kenya has invested a lot in the development of standard guidelines and hopes that quality will follow suit. Alas, this is not automatic, and there is a need to embrace values and ethos associated with quality, as they have done in Finland. Indeed, CBC is based on formative assessments that classroom teachers do. It is the value system, and the ethos and professionalism of the teachers will count. The new crop of teachers from teacher training institutions and universities must strive to achieve these goals to make CBC a success. Thus, the ties between research institutions and teacher training colleges and schools need to be stronger than ever. For example, county governments should take advantage of universities in their counties to assess preschools and provide feedback to the local government. The role of the central government is solely to provide coordination and offer advice.

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