

Effects of First Language in the Learners Literacy and Learning in Early Childhood Educational Centres: Kawalase Zone, Turkana Central Sub-County, Turkana County Kenya

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Abstract: Although the provision of Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) is growing rapidly and has received increased policy attention worldwide, such as, equitable access to quality ECDE that has been viewed by policy makers as a way of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and anchored on the use of first language, little has been done regarding language policy in ECDE in Kenya that emphasizes use of the language of the catchment in The research in this area would help teachers to interpret or use concrete materials from households for learning purposes. This research study discusses the findings of ECDE children's socio-cultural practices of their everyday lifestyles and first language acquisition and its effects on curriculum among ECDE learners in enhancing early childhood education programmes. The study points out ways in which the Kenya national education curriculum, reflecting on ECDE assumptions about education, often alienates and marginalizes rural children, in its failure to capture their cultural Indigenous knowledge of first language in enhancing literacy and learning among ECDE learners. The research investigated the relationships between the first language practices and their effects on ECDE learners' literacy and learning and integrates children's socio-cultural practices of lifestyles and the national ECDE policy of instruction in curriculum implementation taught in local pre -schools and first grade language classrooms in Kenya and the extent to which children's everyday life cultural practices informs language instruction in early childhood grades. The researcher however, recommends that through sensitization and awareness creation, the community and the educational stakeholders should be educated on the sources and importance of first language/mother tongue that could be used to enhance instruction in ECDE centre and more so in Turkana county. Further, the government to strengthen policies that promote an integrated and local adaption of ECDE programmes with descriptions of the benefit of ECDE centres programmes and an idea of indigenous knowledge.

Keywords: Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE), childhood education programmes, rural children.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, there are 50-75 million 'marginalized' children who are not enrolled in school. Children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades. Research has shown that children's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school (UNESCO, 2008a). In spite of growing evidence and parental demand, many educational systems around the world insist on exclusive use of one or sometimes several privileged languages. This means excluding other languages and with them the children who speak them (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006).

The number of languages spoken in Africa varies between 1,000 and 2,500, depending on different estimates and definitions. Monolingual states are non-existent and languages are spread across borders in a range of different constellations and combinations. The number of languages varies from between two and three in Burundi and Rwanda, to more than 400 in Nigeria. The underlying reality beyond each multilingual context is complex, distinctive and changing

(Gadelii, 2004): almost half (48 per cent) of Sub-Saharan African countries have an African language that is spoken by over 50 per cent of the population as a mother tongue. With the additional secondary speakers sometimes at mother-tongue proficiency level, the proportion increases to more than two-thirds (67 per cent). Sixteen of Africa's shared cross-border languages have more than 150 million speakers. Outside the education sector, at least 56 African languages are used in administration and at least 63 African languages are used in the judicial system (26 sub-Saharan nations allow African languages in legislation). In written business communication, at least 66 African languages are used, and at least 242 African languages are used in the mass media.

In Kenya, the language of instruction is English, and some learners in urban and some cosmopolitan settings speak and understand some English by the time they join school. But learners in the rural areas enter school with only their home language. For these learners, using the mother tongue in early literacy and learning leads to a better understanding of the curriculum content and to a more positive attitude towards school.

However, research findings consistently show that learners benefit from using their home language in early literacy and learning in ECDE centres (ahead of an early primary transition stage). Yet, many developing countries continue to use other languages for teaching in their schools. (Gachathi Commission Report 1976)

As a result, therefore, the use of learners' home language in the learning Centres promotes a smooth transition between home and school. It means learners get more involved in the learning process and speeds up the development of basic literacy skills. It also enables more flexibility, innovation and creativity in teacher preparation. Using learners' home language is also more likely to get the support of the general community in the teaching/learning process and creates an emotional stability which translates to cognitive stability. In short, it leads to a better educational outcome. (Ministry of Education 2006)

It is therefore, on the basis of the afore mentioned reasons that the researcher was compelled to undertake the study on the effects of first language in the learners' performances in ECDE centres in Kawalase zone, Turkana Central sub county of Turkana county in order to inform policy makers and the entire community on the need and urgency of the matter for a brighter future.

Statement of the problem:

Despite the Kenyan government commitment to providing basic education to all children, it is critical to develop standards wisely and with caution. This had serious implications to the government's goals of attaining Basic Education for All (BEFA) by 2015.

Although most educators and policy makers agree that a strong start in early literacy is critical, there is less agreement about how this is best accomplished. A major concern is ensuring that the curriculum addresses the overall learning and growth of the young child by continuing to stress the physical, social, emotional, and overall cognitive development of children and at the same time, strengthening the academic curriculum holistically.

A great deal of research has been done on the issue. It shows that early education is an integral part in developing cognitive stimulation, language skills, social and emotional attributes.

Therefore, in this study the researcher endeavored to investigate the effects of first language (mother tongue) on ECDE learner's performance in Kawalase zone, Turkana central sub county in Turkana County so as to inform stakeholders and the policy makers for the realization of better results in future.

Purpose of the study:

The main purpose of this study is to establish the effects of first language in ECDE literacy and learning in Kawalase Zone of Turkana Central sub- County in Turkana County.

Research objectives:

The objectives of this study are:

1. To assess mother tongue practices and their effect on ECDE learners' literacy and learning in Kawalase zone.
2. To determine appropriate early childhood education programmes that maximizes literacy and learning among ECDE learners in Kawalase zone.

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Research questions:

1. How is a mother tongue practice promoting ECDE learners' literacy and learning in Kawalase zone?
2. Which early childhood education programmes could maximize literacy and learning among ECDE learners in Kawalase zone?

Significance:

It is hoped that the findings of this study would be useful in the following ways: -

The findings of the knowledge of the teachers and learners' inclusion as well as participation through first language would help the Ministry of Education to put up plans to sensitize the teachers, pupils and parents on the need for first language in literacy and learning of the ECDE learners in literacy and learning. The findings on the attitude of the teachers and parents would help the ministry to have a clear direction on how to approach the stakeholders as they plan for implementation of literacy and learning of ECDE learners on a wider scale. The findings on the school characteristics that support literacy and learning in ECDE learners would help the government through the ministry of education to create an enabling environment for the literacy and learning of ECDE learners with the language of the catchment. They could also be used as a guide to reforming and restructuring ECDE education delivery programmes. The curriculum developers could also use them to design a curriculum that would focus and cater for the specific needs of all learners in literacy and learning setting in ECDE centres in the zone.

Basic assumptions:

The study was being based on the following assumptions; -

- All the respondents will be cooperative and provide reliable responses.
- ECDE curriculum is understood and implemented across the Centres.
- Community use of first language in ECDE literacy and learning is key in the implementation of ECDE Curriculum in rural areas.
- All the ECDE Centers have the syllabus and follows formal education curriculum

Limitations of the study:

The study was limited by a number of factors such as: distances between schools, most schools were far apart. Insecurity due to cattle rustlers and raids which displaces schools, some schools did not have teachers due to hard conditions and low pay, due to nomadic nature of life, parents were not easy to get. Education officials were too busy to get for responses. The researcher however will seek the use of motorcycle as a means for transport.

Delimitations of the study:

The study focused in Kawalase zone in Turkana central sub county and the information will be relevant to this area. The relevance of information will be among the ECDE teachers, parents of the children in ECDE centers, County education officials and DICECE training institution. The researcher was confined to establish use of community funds of knowledge in enhancing curriculum instruction in ECDE in central division Turkana County.

Definition of significant terms:

The following terms were defined as follows:

Access—Making available means for pupils to participate in learning activities.

Culture—Culture means shared understanding in any society that is, their word view, perceptions, beliefs, customs, values especially as it relates to their views and expectations on education.

Development—This is a multi-dimensional concept which means many things to many people and experts. In this case, it means acquisition of education especially by the girl child.

First language/ (also native language, father tongue/mother tongue, arterial language, or L1) - is a language that a person has been exposed to from birth or within the critical period. If there are multiple L1, the designation "first language" is used for the L1 spoken the best or the one that is the basis for sociolinguistic identity.

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp: (11-20), Month: November - December 2018, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Mother tongue-In some countries, the term native language or mother tongue refers to the language of one's ethnic group rather than one's first language

Literacy-The ability to write, speak, listen, think, and read effectively.

Learning –Process of gaining knowledge or skills by studying, practicing, being taught or experiencing.

Elementary- refers to the introductory, simple, easy facts or parts of a subject that must necessarily be learned first in order to understand succeeding ones.

Participation–Accessibility of girls to equal opportunities and enhanced learning.

School Based Factors–Anything within the school which may discourage the ECDE learners participation in education.

Sustainable Development –is development which improves majority of people’s life or welfare without degrading the environmental base and which can be regenerated continually.

Education–This refers to socialization or indoctrination that is, passive and force acquisition of values, norms, skills and knowledge without questioning.

Organization of the study:

In chapter one, I will outline the contextual background to this research study culminating in the theoretical framework and the problem statement. Research questions and the rationale for this study will also be addressed in chapter one. Chapter two will explore the relevant literature related to effects of first language in the learner’s literacy and learning in ECDE centres in Kawalase Zone, Turkana Central sub-county, Turkana County. The literature will focus on themes that is assessment of mother tongue practices and their effect, to determine appropriate early childhood education programmes that maximizes literacy and learning, in Kawalase zone. Issues related to approaches of learning and instruction relevant to Indigenous children and justification for ethnography methodology. Research related to issues of language, learning materials and textbooks will be discussed in relation to how they hinder culturally relevant pedagogies.

Chapter Three will describe the methodology and data collection methods and their rationales including methods of data analysis and issues related to the trustworthiness of the ethnographic field work process. Chapter Four will present the research finding answering the first research question related to effects of first language in the learner’s literacy and learning in ECDE centres in Kawalase Zone, Turkana Central sub-county, Turkana County. Chapter Five will continue with the findings that answer the second research question related to first language in ECDE literacy and learning. Finally, the conclusion, discussions and implications of the study will conclude with the reflection of the researcher’s experiences in the field and future research agenda.

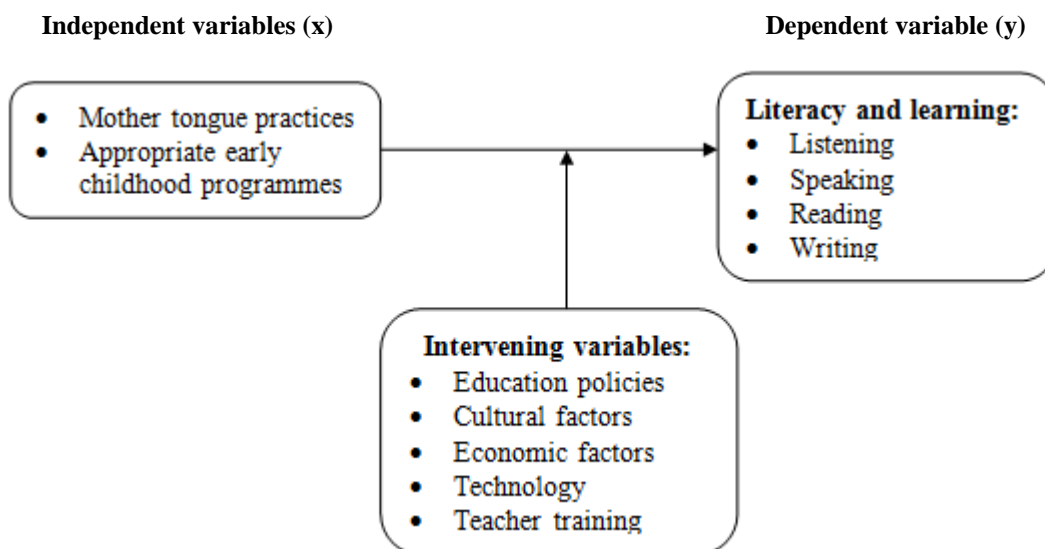


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Researcher (2017).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews what other scholars have had to say about the effects of first language in the learners' literacy and learning in ECDE centres, Kawalase zone, Turkana Central Sub-County, Turkana County. It also gives empirical review of the past research both globally, international and nationally. The chapter also focuses on conceptual framework before concluding with the summary of literature review and research gaps.

Assessments of mother tongue practices and their effect on ecde learners literacy and learning Understanding language:

One's mother tongue is an important factor which influences quality basic education. Language is at the heart of language teaching and learning and teachers need to constantly reflect on what language is. This is because our understandings of language affect the ways we teach languages.(UNESCO 2005)

United Nations standard-setting instruments:

The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) affirms the right to education without discrimination. Article 2 of this fundamental document establishes the basic principle against discrimination on the grounds of language. Article 5 of the 1960 Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education specifically recognizes—the right of the members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including...the use or the teaching of their own language. More recently, numerous other United Nations declarations and conventions affirm the rights of minorities, including Indigenous peoples, to learn and/or have instruction in L1 or their heritage language. Key documents include: the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities(1992, Article 4); the IL Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries(1989, Article 28); the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (Article 45); and the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasize the role of early childhood care and development in laying the foundation for learning and setting the stage for successful engagement in formal education (UNESCO 2005)

Mother tongue instruction in formative stages:

UNESCO has further encouraged mother tongue instruction in primary education since 1953 (UNESCO, 1953) and UNESCO highlights the advantages of mother tongue education right from the start: children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school (Kosonen, 2005); parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning (Benson, 2002); girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often (Hovens, 2002; UNESCO Bangkok, 2005); and children in multilingual education tend to develop better thinking skills compared to their monolingual peers (e.g., Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; King & Mackey, 2007). Some educators argue that only those countries where the student's first language is the language of instruction are likely to achieve the goals of Education for All. Research also suggests that engaging marginalized children in school through mother-tongue based, multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is a successful model (Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Yiakoumetti, 2012)

In addition, research increasingly shows that children ability to learn second or additional languages (e.g., alingua franc and an international language) does not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction throughout primary school. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning additional languages. When children receive formal instruction in their first language throughout primary school and then gradually transition to academic learning in the second language, they learn the second language quickly. If they continue to have opportunities to develop their first language skills in secondary school, they emerge as fully bilingual (or multilingual) learners. If, however, children are forced to switch abruptly or transition too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition may be attenuated or even lost. Even more importantly, their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline, leading to lack of motivation, school failure, and early school dropout (Arnold, C., Bartlett, K., Gowani, S., & Merali, R. (2006.)

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp: (11-20), Month: November - December 2018, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Reasons for instruction in mother tongue:

Early Childhood Development involves a lot of playing; it's important for the activities to be packaged in the language learners understand. At this stage, learners are acquiring new things and it will be easier for them to grasp certain concepts if taught in their indigenous languages. Consequently, it allows pupils to get more involved in the learning process and speeds up the development of basic literacy skills. Moreover, using learners' home language is also more likely to get the support of the general community in the teaching and learning process as it also creates emotional stability which translates to cognitive stability (Klaus, D. (2003).

Psychologists emphasize that a child can grasp concepts more when taught using his or her indigenous language because psychologically the cognitive system in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Culturally, vernacular language is a means of identification among the members of the community to which they belong while socially and educationally, the child learns faster through it than through an unfamiliar language. For learning to be presented to the child in a meaningful and enjoyable way, it should involve a lot of playing; hence it's important for the activities to be packaged in the language learners understand (Amahti-Mehler J, Argentieri S & Canestri J (1993)).

In Kawalase Zone, local language policy, which combines long-term mother tongue instruction with Kiswahili and English, has resulted in higher drop-out rates and lower retention. Similarly, grade repetition in bilingual schools is about half that of traditional schools. Government need to set about enacting policies that recognize mother tongue learning, and - crucially – finance their implementation. This task will be costly and complex: there's a need for more trained teachers from linguistic minority groups, teachers who can teach in more than one language, and textbooks in a language student can understand.

Appropriate early childhood education programmes that maximizes literacy and learning among ECDE learners.

Introducing interesting new words:

Children require multiple exposures to words in order to develop a rich understanding of their meaning and use. Teachers should make a point of introducing interesting new words for children to learn into each classroom activity (Tabors, 2008). Similarities between English and the child's home language can be used as a foundation for instruction (Helman, 2004). For example, if L1 has some of the same phonemes as English, start with those phonemes for rhyme or beginning sound activities because those are sounds the child is already familiar with.

Supporting parent-child reading:

Teachers can support parent-child reading by sending home books in the child's home language. This makes L1 text available to parents, and it lets them know that the teacher considers reading to children in the home language to be important.

Predictable classroom routines:

Predictable classroom routines can also provide scaffolding for English language learners by allowing them to anticipate what will happen each day, including the type of language they will need for each activity (Bunce & Watkins, 1995; Tabors, 2008).

A child who has developed early literacy skills in his or her first language will find it easier to develop those same skills in English. Parents who are not proficient in English should be encouraged to help prepare their children for learning to read by using the home language to: teach rhymes and songs, play word games and share storybooks. The good news, however, is that recent research has shown that high-quality early childhood education programs can have a significant impact on children's later academic achievement (Barnett, 2008). Programs that provide research-based, age-appropriate instruction in early language and literacy skills can ensure that English language learners enter school equipped with the tools they need to be successful learners in kindergarten and beyond (Ballantyne et al., 2008).

Socio-dramatic:

Research demonstrates the importance of socio-dramatic play as a tool for learning curriculum content with 3- through 6-year-old children. When teachers provide a thematic organization for play; offer appropriate props, space, and time; and become involved in the play by extending and elaborating on children's ideas, children's language and literacy skills can be enhanced (Levy, Schaefer, & Phelps 1986; Schrader 1989, 1990; Morrow 1990; Pramling 1991; Levy, Wolfgang, & Koorland 1992).

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp: (11-20), Month: November - December 2018, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

In addition to supporting cognitive development, play serves important functions in children's physical, emotional, and social development (Herron & Sutton-Smith 1971). Children express and represent their ideas, thoughts, and feelings when engaged in symbolic play. During play a child can learn to deal with a sense of competence—all in the safety that only play affords. Through play, children also can develop their imaginations and creativity. Therefore, child initiated, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice (Fein & Rivkin 1986).

Successfully negotiated learning tasks:

Research demonstrates that children need to be able to successfully negotiate learning tasks most of the time if they are to maintain motivation and persistence (Lary 1990; Brophy 1992). Confronted by repeated failure, most children will simply stop trying. So most of the time, teachers should give young children tasks that with effort they can accomplish and present them with content that is accessible at their level of understanding. At the same time, children continually gravitate to situations and stimuli that give them the chance to work at their “growing edge” (Berk & Winsler 1995; Bodrova & Leong 1996). More-over, in a task just beyond the child's independent reach, the adult and more-competent peers contribute significantly to development by providing the supportive “scaffolding” that allows the child to take the next step.

Development and learning are dynamic processes:

Development and learning are dynamic processes requiring that adults understand the continuum, observe children closely to match curriculum and teaching to children's emerging competencies, needs, and interests, and then help children move forward by targeting educational experiences to the edge of children's changing capacities so as to challenge but not frustrate them. Human beings, especially children, are highly motivated to understand what they almost, but not quite, comprehend and to master what they can almost, but not quite, do (White 1965; Vygotsky 1978). The principle of learning is that children can do things first in a supportive context and then later independently and in a variety of contexts. Rogoff (1990) describes the process of adult-assisted learning as “guided participation” to emphasize that children actively collaborate with others to move to more complex levels of understanding and skill.

Children holistic development

children's development in all areas is influenced by their ability to establish and maintain a limited number of positive, consistent primary relationships with adults and other children (Bowlby 1969; Stern 1985; Garbarino et al. 1992). These primary relationships begin in the family but extend over time to include children's teachers and members of the community; therefore, practices that are developmentally appropriate address children's physical, social, and emotional needs as well as their intellectual development.

3. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the Kenya's' education policy placing a lot of emphasis on the use of local resource as the cornerstone for ECDE curriculum instruction, many ECD teachers in central division Turkana county are not aware and do not have adequate knowledge on the importance of first language in enhancing curriculum instructing in ECDE centres. The major findings of the study were presented below:

- The female respondents were an overwhelming majority.
- An average percentage of respondents were of youthful age.
- Most of the respondent ECDE teachers were Diploma ECDE holders
- Half of the respondents had served between 6-11 years as ECDE teachers
- An average ratio of respondents had attended induction course
- Majority of respondents reported written work as a means of evaluating ECDE children
- An average majority of respondents reported a ‘daily’ frequency of evaluating ECDE children.

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

 Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp: (11-20), Month: November - December 2018, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

- Half of the respondents reported ‘by head teachers’ as a means of monitoring and evaluation of learning process in respective ECDE Centres.
- An average majority of respondents collected their teaching and learning materials from the surrounding environment.
- An overwhelming majority of respondents used real objects in teaching and learning of mother tongue in respective ECDE Centres.
- Almost rarely were community resource persons were invited to teach children’s songs and stories from the local communities.
- An overwhelming majority of respondents reported Kiswahili as the main language of instruction.
- Half of respondents agreed that there was use of local language in teaching and learning process in respective ECDE Centres.
- -Either songs and dance or an assorted list of methods of teaching were used in the teaching and learning of mother tongue.
- The attitude of teachers in respondent’s ECDE Centres towards the use of local language, songs, stories, plays and games in the teaching of mother tongue was positive/welcome.
- Inadequacy of teaching and learning resources was the challenge that teachers face in ECDE centres in relation to the teaching and learning of mother tongue in respondent’s ECDE centres.
- Slightly a quarter of respondents reported workshops as a type of support available from the county education officers in regard to use of local resources in teaching and learning of mother tongue in respective ECDE Centres.
- A high majority of respondents agreed with the opinion on the use of local resources as important in teaching and learning process of mother tongue in respective ECDE Centres.
- There was a divided opinion regarding whether in respondents’ pre-school there is organization of materials development days.
- Nearly half of respondents strongly disagreed whether even without using teaching learning resources respondent can still teach well.
- Most respondents agreed that preparation and use of locally available resources consume a lot of time.
- Over a quarter of the respondents did not agree whether use of mother tongue in school lowers the children’ performance.
- Over a quarter of respondents strongly disagreed whether use of locally available resources for teaching makes parents think teachers are of low standards.
- Most of the respondents disagreed whether using locally available resources such as resource persons, museums, libraries and historical sites enhance teaching and learning of mother tongue in respective ECDE Centre.
- Almost half of the sample disagreed whether language and resource persons appear premature.
- More than half of the respondents strongly disagreed on whether they do not belief in the use of locally available teaching resources.
- Half of the respondents strongly agreed that they belief in the use of resource persons from the local community to teach songs, games and plays connects the school and the community and makes learning relevant.
- To a large extent use of cultural resources in teaching influenced literacy and learning of children in ECDE.
- A slight majority reported Government’s contribution in enhancing use of locally available resources with regard to teaching and learning through in-service and training of teachers.

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 5, Issue 6, pp: (11-20), Month: November - December 2018, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Conclusion:

The purpose of the study was to find out the effects of first language in the learners' literacy and learning in ECDE centres, Kawalase Zone, Turkana Central Sub-County, Turkana county,

Based on the first objective of the study which was to assess mother tongue/first language practices and their effect on ECDE learners' literacy and learning in Kawalase zone. This was not fully met as the study " showed that majority of ECDE teachers in central division had inadequate knowledge on first language/mother tongue that could inform local resources and were limited to few local materials in their identified sources and availability of local learning materials used in instruction.

The second objective was to determine an appropriate early childhood education programme that maximizes literacy and learning among ECDE learners in Kawalase zone. The study showed conflicting results in 'teachers' knowledge and awareness on the use of first language/mother tongue in ECDE literacy and learning in curriculum implementation and instruction. Schools do not teach activities relevant to Pastoralism or everyday life activities of the children and portray a negative image of the livelihood yet it is the economic mainstay in the county. It further revealed that most teachers were trained in ECDE and had knowledge and awareness on the effects of first language in the learners' literacy and learning in ECDE centres, but were not adequately using them.

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