

Bridging Theory and Practice in Early Childhood Education: A Framework for Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment in Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe

Blessings Svodai Chimbizikai✉, Ramashego Mphahlele²

^{1,2}University of South Africa, Zimbabwe

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✉ Corresponding author:
[67129633@mylife.unisa.ac.za]

ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECD) policy in Zimbabwe promotes child-centred, play-based, and developmentally appropriate learning; however, a persistent gap between policy intent and classroom practice remains, particularly in resource-constrained settings. This study examined how ECD teachers in Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe, interpret and enact theory-informed curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices under conditions of limited resources. Guided by constructivist, sociocultural, and developmental perspectives, the study employed a qualitative case study design. Six early childhood teachers from three schools participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, with comparison across participants, schools, and data sources supporting interpretation. Four themes emerged: curriculum alignment with theoretical principles, pedagogical enactment of child-centred learning, assessment practices, and systemic barriers. Although teachers valued child-centred and developmentally appropriate practice, large class sizes, limited teaching and learning materials, insufficient professional development, and sociocultural expectations collectively encouraged teacher-directed instruction and summative assessment. The findings reveal that the theory-practice gap reflects not merely teacher knowledge but the interaction of policy expectations, material conditions, professional preparation, and local beliefs about appropriate teaching. The study contributes a context-responsive framework connecting teacher development, low-cost play-based strategies, practical formative assessment, and community engagement to strengthen holistic child development in under-resourced settings. These findings may inform comparable ECD systems facing similar implementation pressures.

Keywords: *early childhood education; curriculum implementation; play-based pedagogy; developmental assessment; teacher practice; Zimbabwe*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Harlen and Crick (2020) present early childhood education as a critical foundation for individual development and broader social advancement. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2018) has attempted to strengthen early childhood development (ECD) by promoting holistic development, child-centred learning, and developmentally appropriate classroom practice. These commitments align with global approaches that encourage teachers to support children's cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and physical development through active learning and meaningful interaction.

Despite these policy commitments, many ECD classrooms continue to experience a sharp divide between intended and enacted practice. Limited materials and infrastructure restrict hands-on and play-based activities; large classes make small-group interaction and individual observation difficult; and uneven professional development encourages teachers to rely on whole-class, teacher-directed instruction and less frequent

formative assessment. The contrast is therefore not simply between policy and practice, but between an ambitious child-centred curriculum and the organisational conditions under which teachers must implement it in Mashonaland West Province.

Contemporary ECD curriculum and pedagogy draw strongly from constructivism, sociocultural theory, and developmental psychology. Fosnot and Perry (2005) link constructivist learning to children's active exploration and meaning-making. Vygotsky (1978) foregrounds social interaction, language, cultural tools, and scaffolding as central to learning. Erikson (1963) shows that early childhood education must support autonomy, initiative, trust, and emotional security. These perspectives encourage teachers to create play-based, inquiry-oriented, socially interactive, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. However, teachers cannot implement these approaches effectively when systems provide limited resources, training, and contextual support.

Recent studies mainly examine discrete aspects of ECD implementation: policy-practice gaps, schools' readiness for curriculum reform, resource constraints, classroom pedagogy, and teachers' professional development needs (Chikumbu & Mlambo, 2019; Dhlomo & Mawere, 2020; Mlambo & Chikumbu, 2021; Muzembe et al., 2021). International research likewise shows that teachers value play and culturally responsive instruction but face contextual and instructional constraints when enacting them (Mgaiwa & Amani, 2024; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2022). These studies clarify specific barriers, but they do not explain how teachers' theoretical understandings, curriculum demands, pedagogical decisions, assessment practices, and contextual pressures interact within a single resource-constrained case. This study addresses that relational gap.

The study asked: How do early childhood education teachers in Mashonaland West Province interpret and implement theory-informed curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices? Its objectives were to examine teachers' interpretations of theory-informed ECD practice, analyse how they enacted curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and identify contextual factors that enabled or constrained enactment. By analysing these elements together, the study develops a context-responsive framework for aligning theory, policy, and classroom practice in resource-constrained ECD settings.

Literature Review

The literature review extends the theoretical overview by tracing how three linked principles, active meaning-making, socially mediated learning, and holistic development, translate into observable curriculum, pedagogical, and assessment decisions. It then evaluates Zimbabwean policy expectations and recent empirical evidence on implementation barriers to establish the analytical dimensions used in this study: theoretical understanding, enacted practice, assessment, and contextual support.

Theoretical foundations of early childhood curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment

Early childhood education draws strongly from theories that view young children as active, social, and developing learners. Constructivist theory, associated mainly with Piaget, argues that children construct knowledge through active engagement with their environment rather than passively receiving information. Fosnot and Perry (2005) explain that constructivist learning occurs when learners explore, manipulate materials, ask questions, and build meaning from experience. In early childhood classrooms, this perspective supports play-based, inquiry-oriented, and experiential pedagogies that allow children to solve problems, experiment with ideas, and develop creativity. Göncü and Main (2023) further show that teachers who understand constructivist principles tend to create flexible learning environments that support children's agency and curiosity.

Piaget's cognitive developmental theory remains relevant because it links learning to children's developmental readiness. During the preoperational stage, children increasingly use language, symbols, imagination, and representational thought but still benefit from concrete experience. Developmentally appropriate curriculum should therefore use manipulatives, pictures, stories, movement, songs, short tasks, guided play, repetition, and choices linked to familiar experiences. Assessment should rely on observation, conversations, demonstrations, drawings, play episodes, portfolios, and simple performance tasks rather than abstract written tests alone. Teachers should judge progress against age-appropriate indicators while allowing variation in language, pace, interests, and ways of demonstrating understanding.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory complements Piaget's work by emphasising the social and cultural nature of learning. Vygotsky (1978) argues that children learn through interaction with adults, peers, language, and cultural tools. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development shows that children can perform more complex tasks when supported by a more knowledgeable person. In ECD classrooms, this theory supports scaffolding, collaborative learning, peer interaction, guided play, and culturally meaningful learning activities. Mgaiwa and Amani (2024) argues that teachers' understanding of sociocultural principles shapes how they organise classroom interaction and support children's learning. In Zimbabwean ECD settings, sociocultural theory is

especially important because children's learning experiences are shaped by local languages, cultural practices, family expectations, and community values.

Developmental psychology also provides an important foundation for ECD curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Erikson's psychosocial theory highlights the importance of trust, autonomy, initiative, and confidence during early childhood. [Erikson \(1963\)](#) argues that children need supportive environments that allow them to explore, make choices, interact positively with others, and develop a sense of competence. This perspective reminds teachers that the ECD curriculum should not focus only on cognitive skills. It should also promote emotional security, social participation, independence, identity formation, and confidence. Assessment should therefore capture children's holistic development rather than focusing solely on their academic performance.

Together, constructivist, sociocultural, and developmental perspectives support an integrated view of early childhood education. They position the teacher as a facilitator who plans developmentally appropriate experiences, scaffolds learning, creates opportunities for interaction, and continuously assesses children's progress. These theories also challenge teacher-centred and rote-based approaches because such approaches limit children's active participation, social interaction, and developmental expression.

Policy expectations for ECD curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean ECD policy reflects many of these theoretical principles. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2018) promotes child-centred, play-based, and holistic early childhood education. The National Early Childhood Development Policy, the ECD Curriculum Framework, and the ZIMSEC ECD syllabus emphasise learning experiences that support cognitive, social, emotional, physical, creative, and language development. These policy documents encourage teachers to use participatory pedagogy, local culture, play, observation, portfolios, checklists, and continuous assessment to monitor children's growth.

The policy direction, therefore, aligns with international expectations for developmentally appropriate practice. [Harlen and Crick \(2020\)](#) argue that assessment should support learning rather than merely measure achievement. Similarly, [Oo \(2020\)](#) cautions that assessment practices should inform teaching decisions and reflect learners' development. In ECD, assessment should be formative, authentic, and embedded in everyday classroom activities. Teachers should observe how children participate, communicate, interact, solve problems, and demonstrate emerging skills during play and structured learning tasks.

However, policy alignment at the document level does not guarantee effective classroom implementation. [Papanagnou et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that, in practice, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment often blur, creating uncertainty for teachers. [Yun et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasise that effective pedagogy depends on strong alignment between curriculum goals and assessment practices. When teachers lack training, resources, and support for implementation, the intended alignment among curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment becomes difficult to sustain.

Pedagogical enactment and the theory-practice gap

The literature shows that ECD teachers often understand the value of child-centred, play-based learning but struggle to consistently enact these approaches. Play-based pedagogy requires appropriate space, teaching materials, flexible classroom organisation, teacher confidence, and manageable class sizes. When these conditions are absent, teachers may revert to direct instruction and rote learning even when policy promotes active learning.

[Dhlomo and Mawere \(2020\)](#) report that Zimbabwean educators experience difficulties in comprehending and applying the revised ECD curriculum. Their findings suggest that teachers require more than policy documents; they need ongoing support to interpret curriculum expectations and translate them into practical classroom routines. [Muzembe et al. \(2021\)](#) similarly show that the implementation of the ECD curriculum in Zimbabwe is constrained by inadequate teaching and learning resources, insufficient teacher training, poor infrastructure, large classes, and heavy workloads. These challenges undermine the implementation of learner-centred, activity-based pedagogy.

[Dube and Sibanda \(2022\)](#) emphasise professional development as a key response to these implementation challenges. However, professional development needs to be context-responsive. Training that assumes ideal classroom conditions may not help teachers working in overcrowded classes, with limited materials, and with weak infrastructure. Teachers need practical strategies for using locally available resources, organising play in small spaces, managing large groups, documenting formative assessment, and adapting activities to children's developmental levels.

Assessment practices in early childhood education

Assessment remains a critical part of the theory-practice relationship in ECD. Developmental and sociocultural theories support an assessment that captures children's learning processes rather than only final

outcomes. [Lam \(2024\)](#) argues that modern assessment should enhance learning quality by focusing on competencies and developmental growth. In ECD classrooms, teachers can use observation notes, anecdotal records, portfolios, oral responses, group activities, drawings, movement, songs, and play episodes as evidence of learning.

The literature nevertheless shows that assessment often remains narrow or summative in practice. When teachers rely mainly on end-of-term performance, they may overlook important aspects of children's development, such as cooperation, emotional regulation, initiative, creativity, problem-solving, and language development. This limits the purpose of ECD assessment. Assessment should help teachers identify children's strengths, plan support, communicate progress to parents, and adjust pedagogy. It should also align with curriculum goals and children's developmental needs.

In resource-constrained contexts, formative assessment can become difficult to sustain because teachers may not have enough time to observe each child closely. Large classes reduce opportunities for individualised feedback, while limited assessment training may leave teachers unsure how to document holistic development. These challenges confirm the need for practical assessment tools that teachers can use in real classrooms without adding excessive administrative burden.

Contextual constraints and the need for grounded implementation support

The literature consistently shows that ECD policy implementation depends on broader school and community conditions. Resource shortages, infrastructure limitations, teacher-pupil ratios, parental involvement, and teacher preparation shape classroom experiences. [Mlambo and Chikumbu \(2021\)](#) connect gaps between policy and practice to resource constraints and systemic support challenges. [Dhlomo and Mawere \(2020\)](#) also show that systemic pressures affect teachers' ability to implement curriculum reforms effectively. These studies suggest that the theory-practice gap is not simply a result of teacher unwillingness. It reflects the interaction between policy ideals and the material conditions under which teachers work.

Sociocultural theory helps explain why context matters. Children's learning takes place within social, cultural, institutional, and material environments. Teachers do not enact curriculum in abstract conditions; they work within real classrooms shaped by available resources, class size, school leadership, parental support, and community expectations. Therefore, effective ECD reform requires implementation models that connect theory with local realities.

Synthesis and research gap

The reviewed literature shows strong agreement that ECD curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment should promote holistic development through child-centred, play-based, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate practices. Constructivist, sociocultural, and developmental theories provide a strong foundation for such practices. Zimbabwean ECD policy also reflects these principles by promoting active learning, formative assessment, and holistic development.

However, the literature also reveals a persistent gap between policy intention and classroom enactment. Teachers often work under conditions that constrain the implementation of theory-informed pedagogy and assessment. Existing studies identify challenges such as inadequate resources, insufficient professional development, large classes, unclear interpretation of the curriculum, and weak support for implementation. What remains less developed is a context-specific understanding of how teachers in Mashonaland West Province actually enact curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment within these constraints. This study addresses that gap by examining teachers' classroom practices, interpretations, and experiences, thereby contributing evidence on how theory-informed ECD policy becomes practice in selected Zimbabwean schools.

Theoretical Framework

The literature reviewed in this section situates the study within key theoretical and empirical debates on early childhood education. It examines how constructivist, sociocultural, and developmental perspectives inform curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and assessment in ECD settings. The review also considers Zimbabwean policy expectations and empirical evidence on the challenges teachers face when translating theory into classroom practice. By engaging these sources, the section establishes the conceptual foundation for analysing the gap between theory-informed ECD policy and everyday teaching realities in Mashonaland West Province.

Constructivist Perspectives and Early Childhood Curriculum

[Fosnot and Perry \(2020\)](#) argue that constructivist theory positions children as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information. In early childhood classrooms, this view encourages teachers to design activities that allow children to explore materials, ask questions, solve problems, test ideas,

and construct meaning through experience. [Harlen and Crick \(2020\)](#) connect this orientation to curriculum and assessment practices that value inquiry, reflection, and children's active participation in learning.

Constructivism strongly supports play-based and inquiry-driven pedagogy. [Göncü and Main \(2023\)](#) show that teachers' beliefs shape the learning environments they create, honouring children's interests, culture, and experiences. When teachers understand constructivist principles, they can organise classrooms around exploration, collaboration, and problem-solving. However, constructivist pedagogy requires time, materials, flexible planning, and responsive teacher facilitation. In resource-constrained ECD classrooms, teachers may know the value of child-led learning but still rely on direct instruction because they lack sufficient space, learning materials, and support.

Sociocultural Theory and Classroom Interaction

Vygotsky (1978) places social interaction, language, cultural context, and guided participation at the centre of children's learning. Sociocultural theory helps ECD teachers understand that children develop through interaction with adults, peers, families, and community practices. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development explains how teachers and more capable peers can support children to perform tasks they cannot yet complete independently.

[Mlambo and Chikumbu \(2021\)](#) show that Zimbabwean ECD classrooms operate within specific cultural and material contexts that shape teaching and learning. [Bernard \(2024\)](#) further stresses that teachers' interpretation of sociocultural principles influences how they scaffold learning, use dialogue, and incorporate collaborative activities. In Zimbabwe, sociocultural theory also supports the use of local languages, indigenous games, community knowledge, and culturally familiar examples. However, sociocultural pedagogy requires teachers to balance curriculum expectations with children's home experiences and community values. This balance becomes difficult when communities equate good teaching with formal instruction, memorisation, and visible written work.

Developmental Psychology, Holistic Learning, and Assessment

Developmental psychology helps teachers plan learning experiences that match children's developmental needs. [Erikson \(1963\)](#) emphasises trust, autonomy, and initiative during early childhood, while developmental perspectives broadly encourage teachers to support cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and physical growth. Developmentally appropriate practice requires teachers to consider children's age, abilities, interests, culture, and individual learning pathways when they plan instruction and assessment.

[Harlen and Crick \(2020\)](#) argue that assessment should support learning rather than merely classify performance. [Lam \(2024\)](#) similarly emphasises the need to improve competency assessment so that it captures children's development more meaningfully. In ECD settings, formative assessment should include observation, anecdotal records, learning portfolios, checklists, and teacher reflections on children's progress. These tools can help teachers understand how children develop over time. However, when teachers lack assessment training or manageable class sizes, they may use end-of-term judgements that do not fully capture holistic development.

Theory-Practice Gaps in Zimbabwean ECD

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2018) promotes child-centred, play-based, and holistic early childhood development. [Chikumbu and Mlambo \(2019\)](#) note that policy reforms create important opportunities for strengthening ECD, but implementation depends on the support teachers receive. Chikumbu, Mlambo, and [Ndlovu \(2020\)](#) show that Zimbabwean ECD teachers often struggle to apply progressive pedagogies because resources, training, and classroom conditions do not match policy expectations.

[Dube and Sibanda \(2022\)](#) argue that professional development must respond to teachers' actual classroom contexts. Their work supports the need for practical training that helps teachers use low-cost materials, manage large classes, integrate play-based activities, and assess children formatively. This study builds on these debates by examining how theory-informed curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment appear in teachers' reported understandings and classroom practices in Mashonaland West Province.

2. METHODS

This section explains the methodological approach used to investigate how early childhood development teachers interpret and apply theory-informed curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices in Mashonaland West Province. It outlines the qualitative case study design, participant selection, data generation methods, and data analysis procedures. The section also describes the ethical considerations and trustworthiness measures that guided the study. By presenting these methodological decisions, the section clarifies how the study generated credible evidence on the relationship between theoretical expectations and classroom practice in selected ECD settings.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative case study design to examine teachers' interpretations and enacted practices within the bounded context of three ECD schools in Mashonaland West Province. The design enabled comparison between teachers' accounts, observed classroom practice, and the conditions shaping curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Participants and Sampling

The study purposively selected six ECD teachers from three schools that offered early childhood education. Two teachers participated from each school. The selection focused on teachers with direct experience in ECD teaching, curriculum implementation, and classroom assessment. The sample allowed the study to compare teachers' understandings and practices across different school contexts within the same province. Although the small sample limited generalisation, it supported an in-depth qualitative analysis of the theory-practice relationship.

Data Generation

The study generated data through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. The interview guide covered theoretical principles, child-centred and play-based pedagogy, developmental assessment, and implementation barriers. The observation schedule used corresponding indicators, including learner participation, use of materials, teacher scaffolding, interaction patterns, and assessment practices. Aligning both instruments with the research question and theoretical constructs strengthened content relevance and allowed the researcher to compare reported beliefs with enacted practice. Using interviews and observations across three schools supported methodological and site triangulation.

Data Analysis

The researchers analysed interview transcripts and observation notes through Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases: familiarisation, initial coding, theme construction, theme review, theme definition and naming, and reporting. NVivo supported data organisation and retrieval. Deductive codes derived from constructivist, sociocultural, and developmental perspectives, while inductive codes captured unanticipated patterns. The researcher compared codes across participants, schools, and data sources; reviewed candidate themes against the coded extracts and full dataset; and retained four themes that answered the research question.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The researchers strengthened credibility by comparing interview accounts with classroom observations across three schools. A clear audit trail linked raw data, codes, theme development, and interpretations, while reflexive notes documented analytical decisions and possible researcher influence. Thick descriptions of the setting, participants, and classroom conditions supported readers' judgements about transferability. The researcher used site- and participant-specific pseudonyms, such as TAS1 and TBS1, obtained institutional and education-authority permissions, secured informed consent, and protected participants' identities in reporting.

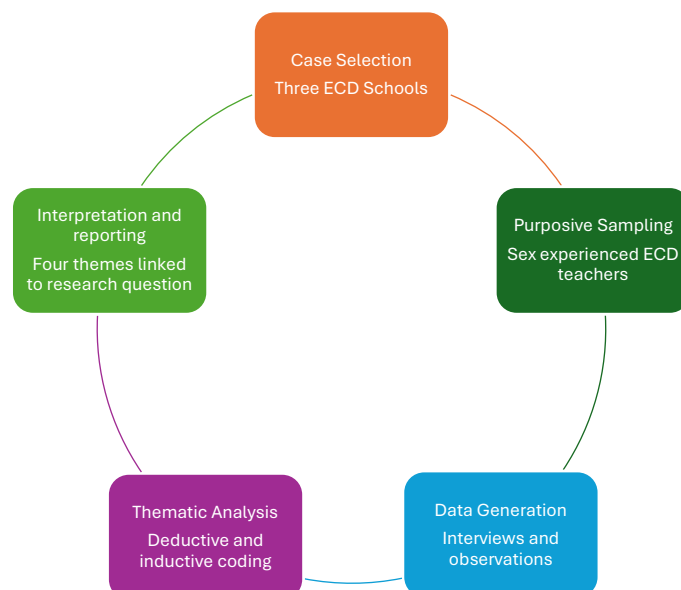


Figure 1: Research design and analytical process (Source: The researcher's own design)

Findings

The findings show that teachers recognised the value of theory-informed early childhood practice, but contextual pressures limited the extent to which they enacted these principles. Four themes emerged from the analysis: curriculum alignment with theoretical principles, pedagogical practices, assessment strategies, and systemic barriers.

Table 1: Summary of themes and cross-participant patterns

Theme	Cross-participant pattern	Implication
Curriculum alignment	Teachers understood child-centred and developmental principles, but conditions restricted enactment.	Policy expectations require contextual implementation support.
Pedagogical practices	Whole-class and rote approaches often displaced play, inquiry, and small-group interaction.	Training should model manageable low-cost strategies.
Assessment strategies	Assessment favoured end-point performance; continuous holistic records were inconsistent.	Teachers need simple formative tools and shared criteria.
Systemic barriers	Large classes, limited materials, infrastructure, training, and social expectations interacted.	Improvement requires coordinated school, policy, and community action.

Curriculum Alignment with Theoretical Principles

Teachers showed general awareness of child-centred, inquiry-based, and developmentally appropriate curriculum principles. Their explanations reflected constructivist and sociocultural ideas by associating effective ECD teaching with play, exploration, social interaction, and children's active participation. This awareness aligned with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's (2018) emphasis on holistic ECD and with Fosnot and Perry's (2005) view that children construct knowledge through active engagement.

Across the three schools, teachers consistently described a mismatch between curriculum expectations and classroom conditions. They valued exploration and participation, but material shortages and high learner numbers limited opportunities for hands-on work, free exploration, and individual support. The pattern indicates that teachers did not reject child-centred learning; material and organisational constraints limited its enactment.

Pedagogical Practices

Classroom observations across the sites showed a recurring reliance on whole-class explanation, repetition, and rote activity, even though teachers described play-based learning as valuable. Interviews and observations converged: large classes, limited materials, and insufficient practice-focused training made teacher-directed instruction easier to manage than activity stations, guided play, or small-group inquiry.

This finding illustrates the practical tension between constructivist pedagogy and classroom realities. [Göncü and Main \(2023\)](#) show that teachers need supportive environments to enact constructivist beliefs. In this study, teachers' beliefs did not automatically translate into practice because classroom conditions encouraged direct teaching. Sociocultural theory also helps explain the finding that teachers worked within institutional and community expectations that often valued visible, formal instruction more than exploratory play. [Mgaiwa and Amani \(2024\)](#) emphasises that teachers' interpretation of sociocultural principles shapes classroom practice, but this study shows that interpretation alone cannot overcome structural constraints.

Assessment Strategies

Assessment practices varied across participants. Some teachers used checklists and brief observation notes, but most accounts emphasised end-of-term performance more than continuous evidence of cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language development. Across the cases, teachers lacked shared criteria and practical recording tools for monitoring individual progress and using assessment evidence to adjust teaching.

The finding points to a weak alignment between assessment practice and developmental theory. [Harlen and Crick \(2020\)](#) argue that assessment should support learning, while [Lam \(2024\)](#) stresses the need for competency assessment that captures development more meaningfully. In the observed ECD context, teachers needed clearer tools and training to use formative and developmental assessment. The continued reliance on summative assessment limited teachers' ability to monitor children's progress and adapt teaching to individual needs.

Systemic Barriers to Theory-Informed Practice

Participants identified inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching and learning materials, large class sizes, insufficient professional development, and cultural expectations as major barriers. These barriers affected curriculum delivery, pedagogy, and assessment simultaneously. Teachers could not easily create learning centres, organise small-group activities, observe individual children, or maintain detailed developmental records when working with large classes and limited resources.

The participants collectively linked the policy-practice gap to high learner numbers, insufficient resources, restricted classroom space, limited professional development, and expectations that visible formal instruction demonstrates effective teaching. Some teachers improvised with available materials, but these individual adaptations could not fully address structural constraints. The cross-case pattern shows that teachers require professional development and implementation support designed for large, low-resource classrooms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a persistent theory-practice gap across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. They extend Zimbabwean studies that separately identify policy implementation problems, limited readiness, resource shortages, pedagogical divergence, and professional development needs (Chikumbu & Mlambo, 2019; Dhlomo & Mawere, 2020; Dube & Sibanda, 2022; Mlambo & Chikumbu, 2021; Muzembe et al., 2021). By analysing these dimensions together, the present study shows that weak enactment arises from their interaction: teachers may understand policy and theory, yet class size, materials, assessment tools, professional learning, and community expectations jointly shape what becomes feasible.

Constructivist theory framed teachers' commitment to play, exploration, and active learning, while observations showed that such commitment did not automatically produce learner-centred practice. Similar international research reports that teachers value play but must plan carefully around contextual restrictions (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2022), and that meaningful learning depends on combining teacher and child agency (Sisson, 2023). The present findings add a resource-sensitive explanation: low-cost local materials, peer groups, rotating activity stations, and structured play routines can make active learning more manageable, but sustained enactment also requires institutional support.

Sociocultural theory explains why language, relationships, cultural tools, and community expectations influenced implementation. The finding that formal instruction sometimes carried greater legitimacy than exploratory play is consistent with evidence that culturally responsive ECD requires teachers to negotiate beliefs as well as instructional challenges (Mgaiwa & Amani, 2024). It also supports global evidence that ECD quality cannot be inferred from access or policy alone because classroom processes and local conditions matter (Raikes et al., 2023). Schools should therefore engage families and community leaders in explaining how guided play, local knowledge, and formative assessment support learning.

Developmental psychology highlighted the need to assess cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language growth continuously. Yet the dominance of end-point assessment limited teachers' ability to identify individual progress and adapt teaching. This finding aligns with work that positions teachers as central interpreters of evidence about young children's learning (Howie, 2023) and with research demonstrating that developmentally meaningful assessment tools must fit the setting in which teachers use them (Raikes et al., 2023). The study therefore supports practical observation schedules, anecdotal records, portfolios, and performance tasks linked to clear developmental indicators.

Zimbabwean policy promotes progressive ECD principles, but policy statements cannot enact themselves. The convergence of interview and observation evidence supports calls for practical professional development (Dube & Sibanda, 2022), stronger curriculum readiness (Dhlomo & Mawere, 2020), and classroom resources that enable child-centred pedagogy (Mlambo & Chikumbu, 2021). Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 provides class-size guidance, but participants' experiences indicate that standards also require school-level resourcing, monitoring, and support. The proposed framework consequently connects four mutually reinforcing elements: teacher learning, adaptable pedagogy, usable assessment tools, and community and institutional support.

4. CONCLUSION

This study showed that ECD teachers understood child-centred, play-based, sociocultural, and developmental principles but enacted them unevenly because policy expectations exceeded the support available in their classrooms. The contribution lies in a context-responsive framework that treats curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and implementation conditions as interdependent rather than isolated concerns. To narrow the theory-practice gap, teacher-development providers should model low-cost strategies for large classes; schools should support locally available materials, indigenous games, storytelling, songs, peer learning, and rotating activity stations; and education authorities should provide simple observation, anecdotal-record,

and portfolio tools for continuous assessment. Policymakers and school leaders should improve classroom space, teaching materials, manageable learning groups, and implementation monitoring. Schools should also engage families and community leaders so that local expectations support guided play, holistic development, and formative assessment. These coordinated actions can help teachers translate sound theoretical understanding into feasible everyday practice in resource-constrained ECD settings.

Recommendations

The study offers five recommendations to strengthen the alignment between early childhood theory and practice in Zimbabwean ECD classrooms. Provide context-responsive professional development. Training should show teachers how to implement constructivist and sociocultural strategies in large classes and low-resource classrooms. Support low-cost play-based pedagogy. Schools and teacher educators should help teachers use locally available materials, indigenous games, storytelling, songs, and peer interaction to support active learning. Strengthen formative and developmental assessment. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and teacher education institutions should develop simple observation tools, anecdotal record templates, and portfolio guidelines that teachers can use consistently. Improve resourcing and infrastructure. Policymakers and school leaders should prioritise classroom space, teaching materials, and support for manageable learning groups in ECD classes. Engage families and communities. Schools should involve parents and community leaders in discussions about the value of play-based learning, holistic development, and formative assessment so that home and school expectations support each other.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

The study used a small purposive sample of six teachers from three schools in one province; therefore, the findings offer analytical insight rather than statistical generalisability. The case boundaries and similar provincial context may limit transferability to differently resourced, urban, or national settings. Participants may have presented socially desirable accounts, and the researcher's presence may have influenced observed lessons. Triangulation reduced, but could not eliminate, these threats to credibility. Future studies should include more provinces and diverse rural and urban schools, use repeated observations or multiple observers, and examine how the proposed framework influences teacher practice and children's learning over time. Research should also investigate parents' interpretations of play-based learning and compare low-cost formative assessment strategies across resource-constrained contexts.

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