



PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN URBAN BULAWAYO: IS ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OVEREMPHASISED IN ECD CENTRES?

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Abstract:

In urban Zimbabwe, parental perceptions of quality in early childhood education (ECD) increasingly prioritise English proficiency, often at the expense of mother-tongue instruction and holistic development, creating tensions with national language policies. This study explored parental criteria for ECD centre quality in Bulawayo Central District, assessing the dominance of English proficiency, its impact on children's development and strategies to align perceptions with policy goals. Employing a pragmatic mixed-methods design, the study integrated quantitative surveys (n=100 parents) with qualitative interviews (n=20 teachers, n=10 administrators), focus groups (n=3 with parents), non-participant observations and document analysis in 13 registered and unregistered ECD centres. Findings revealed that 68% of parents prioritised English fluency, particularly high-income families (76%), with a significant socio-economic association ($\chi^2=9.32$, $p<0.05$), though 24% valued safety and play-based learning. Elite centres allocated 45% of instructional time to English, neglecting arts (15%), physical (10%) and socio-emotional (15%) domains, contrasting with public centres' balanced approach. Narratives highlighted teachers' struggles with policy-parental tensions, with public centres demonstrating multilingual resilience. The study extends Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by positioning parental aspirations as mediators of language use, proposing awareness campaigns, teacher training in multilingual pedagogies and community engagement to bridge policy-practice gaps. Limitations include urban focus and self-report bias, suggesting further urban-rural comparative research. These findings inform Zimbabwean ECD policy by advocating inclusive curricula that balance linguistic and developmental priorities in multilingual urban contexts.

Keywords: early childhood education, English proficiency, mother-tongue instruction, parental perceptions, holistic development, sociocultural theory, policy implementation

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1. Introduction

Global discussions on the language of instruction in early childhood development (ECD) highlight the benefits of mother-tongue education. Research indicates that multilingual programmes rooted in local languages enhance learning outcomes and reduce long-term educational costs, particularly in African contexts (Trudell *et al.*, 2023). Language environments in ECD settings shape children's linguistic and cognitive development through interactions with adults, with tools measuring conversational exchanges and diverse inputs proving essential (Finders *et al.*, 2023). International efforts to monitor ECD access reveal disparities, especially in low-income countries where data collection remains inconsistent (Raikes *et al.*, 2023). Educators' views on linguistic diversity are critical, as they value cultural backgrounds but often require training to support multilingual needs effectively (Finders *et al.*, 2023). Early transitions to unfamiliar languages can impede literacy development, necessitating policies that extend the use of familiar languages (Kwok *et al.*, 2024).

In Africa, debates focus on balancing local languages with former colonial ones. Mother-tongue instruction fosters engagement and understanding, yet implementation faces resistance due to entrenched educational paradigms and increasing enrolment pressures (Trudell *et al.*, 2023). Challenges include stakeholder opposition, policy inconsistencies and the need for community involvement to sustain local language programmes (UNESCO, 2023). Global ECD goals, such as those aligned with sustainable development objectives, often overlook local cultural contexts, leading to standardised approaches that may not suit African settings (Akkari, 2022). For girls' education in sub-Saharan Africa, language barriers intersect with social norms, limiting access to content and affecting emotional well-being, with calls for pedagogies that address these challenges (Milligan and Adamson, 2022). Integrating indigenous knowledge and play-based methods shows potential for culturally relevant ECD, though resource constraints persist (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024).

Zimbabwe's policy framework establishes the mother tongue as the foundation for early learning, recognising 16 official languages. The Constitution and amended Education Act mandate local language use in ECD and early primary levels, with English introduced progressively as a subject before becoming the primary medium from Grade 4 (Hang'ombe and Mumpane, 2020). This approach aims to ensure equitable treatment of all languages, including minority ones like Tonga, though implementation faces challenges such as resource shortages and uneven application (Hang'ombe and Mumpane, 2020). Official guidelines permit minority languages in early grades where they predominate, but English dominates assessments and higher education (UNICEF, 2017). Teachers often employ code-switching between local languages and English to facilitate understanding, highlighting a disconnect between policy and practice (Mhindu, 2025). Minority language speakers face barriers when educators lack proficiency in their languages, leading to communication challenges and reduced engagement (Mhindu, 2025). The policy supports mother-tongue instruction up to Grade 3, with a transition to

English thereafter, but enforcement varies regionally (UNICEF, 2017). Declining academic performance has been linked to insufficient mother-tongue instruction, prompting calls for improved teacher training and deployment in local languages (Zenda, 2021).

In urban Zimbabwe, particularly in Bulawayo, parents perceive English as a language of prestige and a gateway to opportunities. Many prioritise English proficiency when selecting ECD centres, associating it with future success in employment and social mobility (Ndamba, 2008). This perception, rooted in colonial legacies, leads parents to favour centres emphasising English over local languages (Gudyanga *et al.*, 2015). In multilingual urban settings, English holds significant influence, shaping parental choices despite policies supporting mother tongues (Gudyanga *et al.*, 2015). Parental language ideologies often encourage early English exposure at home and in educational settings (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021). Preferences for colonial languages persist, even when evidence suggests local languages could offer educational and cultural benefits (Ndamba, 2008).

Parental emphasis on English fluency as a marker of ECD quality risks sidelining other developmental domains. This focus may lead centres to prioritise language drills, potentially neglecting physical, social and emotional growth (Gudyanga *et al.*, 2015). Perceptions of quality often overlook inclusive practices, with parents valuing academic indicators over holistic development (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). In both rural and urban contexts, this emphasis can marginalise play-based learning and cultural elements essential for well-rounded development (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). Diverse developmental needs may go unmet, affecting children's overall well-being (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Interactions between parents and educators could promote balanced language use, but current priorities risk limiting developmental outcomes (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Play-based pedagogies offer opportunities to support multiple domains, yet parental demands for English may undermine these approaches (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024).

Research on parental perceptions of ECD quality in Zimbabwe remains limited, particularly regarding the tension between language policies and urban preferences. Studies on parental involvement and preferences exist but rarely explore how the focus on English interacts with mother-tongue mandates (Gudyanga *et al.*, 2015). Gaps persist in understanding how these perceptions influence enrolment patterns and centre practices in urban areas like Bulawayo, where linguistic diversity complicates implementation (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). Few studies address equity and access for minority language speakers within this context (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). This scarcity of evidence highlights the need for targeted research to inform policy and practice.

This study aims to explore parental perceptions of quality in ECD in urban Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on the prominence of English proficiency. The objectives are:

- 1) To investigate factors influencing parental selection of ECD centres in Bulawayo.
- 2) To assess the extent to which English proficiency shapes these perceptions.
- 3) To evaluate the impact on children's holistic development.

- 4) To propose measures for aligning parental perceptions with policy goals on language and development.

The study offers significant implications. Findings can inform policymakers on strengthening mother-tongue implementation while addressing urban parental expectations. ECD educators may gain insights into balancing curriculum requirements with parental demands, fostering programmes that support all developmental domains. Advocacy groups can leverage the results to promote awareness of holistic child development, encouraging inclusive educational practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Quality in Early Childhood Education

Arguments surrounding quality in early childhood education (ECD) have evolved from a primary emphasis on access in the early 2010s to a broader recognition of multifaceted dimensions in recent years. International bodies like UNICEF, UNESCO and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have shaped this progression. UNICEF (2019) highlighted equitable access as central to quality, focusing on reducing disparities in low-income regions, while UNESCO (2023) advocated for culturally responsive curricula that integrate local contexts into global standards. NAEYC (2020) complements these views with standards on educator-child interactions, yet disagreements arise in implementation; for instance, UNESCO's push for linguistic diversity sometimes conflicts with NAEYC's standardised approaches (Akkari, 2022). This has advanced knowledge by providing measurement frameworks, but it has also created confusion among practitioners in Africa, where global metrics fail to align with local realities (Raikes *et al.*, 2023). Alternative perspectives from OECD (2025) introduce socio-economic equity as a core element. These debates relate to the current study's objective of evaluating effects on holistic development, yet weaknesses include a lack of empirical testing in urban African contexts like Zimbabwe. Implications for this study involve questioning whether such frameworks adequately address parental priorities in Bulawayo.

Holistic dimensions of ECD quality encompass cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, cultural and linguistic development, with arguments developing from isolated domain-focused research to integrated models. Early work emphasised cognitive growth through structured activities (Raikes *et al.*, 2023), but recent studies complement this with socio-emotional aspects (Parker *et al.*, 2021). Physical development gains attention in nutrition-linked research (Mokone *et al.*, 2023), while cultural and linguistic dimensions are highlighted in sociocultural frameworks (Finders *et al.*, 2023). Disagreements persist; some argue that linguistic exposure in mother tongues enhances all domains (Kwok *et al.*, 2024), whereas others note trade-offs in multilingual settings (Akkari, 2022). This has increased knowledge on interconnected development but caused confusion in policy application in Africa (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). Alternative views stress play-based integration (Zosh *et al.*, 2022). These aspects connect to the study's aim, yet weaknesses

lie in the conceptual vagueness of 'holistic'. For the current research, this raises questions about how urban Zimbabwean parents' English focus might disrupt these dimensions.

2.2 Parental Perceptions of Quality in ECD

Perceptions of ECD quality among parents in Africa have shifted from viewing centres as caregiving facilities to strategic investments, with studies in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe illustrating this trend. In Kenya, parents link quality to academic preparedness and English skills (Ng'asike, 2021), complementing South African findings where structured environments are prized (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Zimbabwean research shows urban parents favour discipline but question holistic roles (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021). These works complement each other but disagree on priorities, leading to an advanced understanding of variations yet confusion over universal markers (Njuguna, 2024). Alternative perspectives reveal positive views on practical skills (Njuguna, 2024). Relating to this study's objectives, these perceptions inform centre selection, but weaknesses include small sample sizes. This prompts implications for Bulawayo on realigning perceptions with holistic goals.

Cultural capital and aspirations play pivotal roles in parental choices, evolving from Bourdieu's (1986) ideas to post-colonial applications. Higher-educated parents prioritise prestige languages like English (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021), complementing aspirations in Indian parallels (Kaushik and Sharma, 2022). Disagreements emerge; some argue this perpetuates elitism (Akkari, 2022), while others view it as adaptive (Ndamba, 2008). This has enriched knowledge on socio-economic influences but sown confusion in equity discussions (OECD, 2025). Alternative views suggest collaborative models (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). These elements tie to the study's exploration of English dominance, yet the weaknesses involve overlooking minority groups. For this research, implications include examining how cultural capital in Bulawayo skews holistic development.

2.3 Language of Instruction in ECD

Theoretical foundations for language in ECD have developed from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural emphasis to Cummins' (2000) distinction between BICS and CALP. Vygotsky's ideas underpin mother-tongue scaffolding (Trudell *et al.*, 2023), complemented by Cummins' focus on academic proficiency (Kwok *et al.*, 2024). Disagreements arise; some advocate multilingualism (UNESCO, 2023), while others critique cultural contexts (Akkari, 2022). This progression has clarified acquisition processes but created confusion in diverse settings. Alternative reviews propose trends like digital tools (Fleer, 2020). Relating to objectives, these theories frame policy-practice tensions, but weaknesses include limited empirical validation in Africa. Implications for this study involve questioning how these theories explain parental English preferences in Bulawayo.

Zimbabwe's language policy versus practice reveals a widening gap. Policy mandates local languages in ECD (UNICEF, 2017; Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020),

but practice involves code-switching (Mhindu, 2025). Studies complement by noting post-COVID strategies (Chikoko, 2024), yet disagree on enforcement (Zenda, 2021). This has increased awareness of disparities but confused stakeholders (Makuvire *et al.*, 2020). Alternative views advocate community involvement (Mutumbami *et al.*, 2023). These tensions relate to the study's assessment of English dominance, with weaknesses in urban-specific data. This raises questions for Bulawayo on bridging divides.

2.4 Consequences of Overemphasising English

Overemphasis on English neglects indigenous languages, leading to cultural identity erosion. Early views linked English to prestige (Ndamba, 2008), complemented by recent warnings on heritage loss (Akkari, 2022). Disagreements persist; some see hybrid identities as beneficial (Guma, 2019), while others argue that it deepens alienation (Adams-Ojugbele and Moletsane, 2024). This has advanced understanding, but caused confusion in balancing globalisation with preservation. Alternative perspectives highlight motivational challenges (Khan and Mohsin, 2024). Relating to holistic effects, this connects to the study's evaluation objectives, yet weaknesses involve anecdotal evidence. Implications for Bulawayo include exploring identity erosion's long-term effects.

Limited focus on socio-emotional or physical development arises from English-centric curricula. Play-based advocates argue English drills hinder emotional growth (Parker *et al.*, 2021), complementing physical development research (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Disagreements emerge; some prioritise language for cognitive gains (Raikes *et al.*, 2023), others integrated approaches (Zosh *et al.*, 2022). This has enriched knowledge but confused prioritisation in resource-poor areas. Alternative views stress critical thinking via play (Pyle and Danniels, 2022). These consequences are tied to the study's development assessment. This prompts questions on mitigating neglect in urban Zimbabwe.

Inequalities between elite and township schools intensify. Elite centres cater to English demands (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021), complementing inequality critiques (Kurebwa and Mabvurira, 2024). Disagreements involve whether policies reduce gaps (UNICEF, 2017) or perpetuate them (Akkari, 2022). This has highlighted systemic issues but confused reform paths. Alternative perspectives advocate inclusive funding (OECD, 2025). Relating to enrolment patterns, weaknesses include regional biases. Implications for this study question elite-township dynamics in Bulawayo.

2.5 Research Gap

Despite advancements, empirical work on Bulawayo Central District parents' perceptions as drivers of ECD practices remains insufficient. Broad studies on involvement (Gudyanga *et al.*, 2015) complement language preferences (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021) but lack urban depth (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). Weaknesses include qualitative limitations. This gap, relating to all objectives, calls for viewing perceptions as mediators.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy to guide the exploration of parental perceptions of quality in early childhood education (ECD) in urban Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on the emphasis on English proficiency in Bulawayo Central District. Pragmatism prioritised practical solutions to the research problem, valuing the integration of multiple perspectives to address complex social phenomena (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). This philosophy justified a mixed-methods approach, as it allowed the study to combine quantitative data on parental priorities with qualitative insights into classroom practices and teacher experiences. Pragmatism's emphasis on context-driven inquiry aligned with the study's aim to examine the interplay between parental expectations and national language policies in a multilingual urban setting. This approach complemented prior ECD research advocating flexible methodologies (Johnson *et al.*, 2019) but differed from positivist or interpretivist stances that might restrict data collection to singular paradigms. The pragmatic stance advanced knowledge by embracing methodological pluralism but raised concerns about maintaining coherence across diverse data types, prompting questions about how this philosophy could inform balanced policy recommendations in Bulawayo's diverse linguistic landscape.

3.2 Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate parental perceptions of ECD quality, particularly the emphasis on English proficiency. A mixed-methods approach integrated quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a detailed understanding of the research problem, capturing numerical trends and lived experiences (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative surveys gathered parental priorities and expectations, while qualitative interviews, focus groups and non-participant observations offered varied perspectives from teachers and classroom interactions. This design aligned with the objectives of investigating factors shaping parental choices, assessing English proficiency's dominance, evaluating impacts on holistic development and proposing measures to align perceptions with policy goals. Triangulation through mixed methods enhanced finding validity by cross-verifying data sources (Johnson *et al.*, 2019). The pragmatic philosophy underpinned this design, enabling flexibility to address the study's contextual complexities, though it risked interpretive challenges if data conflicted, as noted in mixed-methods ECD studies (Ng'asike, 2021). Implications included the potential to reveal discrepancies between parental expectations and classroom practices, raising questions about how mixed data could inform policy adjustments in multilingual urban contexts.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised parents with children in ECD A and B (ages 4–6) in registered and unregistered ECD centres in Bulawayo Central District, alongside teachers

and administrators. Bulawayo's diverse urban population, with linguistic groups including Ndebele, Shona and minority languages like Tonga, made it a suitable setting for examining language-related perceptions (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). Registered and unregistered centres ensured alignment with national ECD policies mandating mother-tongue instruction while capturing informal practices (UNICEF, 2017).

A combination of purposive and stratified random sampling ensured representativeness. For parents, stratified random sampling divided the population into strata based on socio-economic status (high-income, middle-income, low-income) and centre type (elite private, township private, public, unregistered), accounting for variations influenced by economic and educational backgrounds (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021). A total of 100 parents were sampled, with approximately 25 from each stratum, to achieve statistical strength for quantitative analysis, justified by power analysis indicating a minimum of 88 participants for detecting a medium effect size (0.3) at $\alpha=0.05$ and power=0.8 for chi-square tests with $df=4$ (Creswell, 2014). Purposive sampling selected teachers ($n=20$) and administrators ($n=10$) from 13 centres (10 registered, 3 unregistered), targeting those with direct experience in curriculum delivery and parental interactions. This approach complemented studies advocating diverse perspectives (Ng'asike, 2021) but contrasted with purely random sampling, which might overlook contextual subtleties. The pragmatic philosophy supported this sampling by valuing context-specific representation. This raised questions about how socio-economic diversity shaped English emphasis and whether sampling biases affected holistic development findings in Bulawayo.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Multiple instruments addressed the research objectives in detail. A structured parent questionnaire collected quantitative data on ECD quality criteria, expectations and English proficiency emphasis. Likert-scale items (e.g., "On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is English fluency in choosing an ECD centre?") and demographic questions contextualised responses, adapted from validated tools used in African contexts (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Development involved pilot testing with 10 parents to ensure clarity and validation drawn from established surveys in ECD perception research (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021). The questionnaire quantified perceptions across a large sample but risked bias from self-reports, mitigated through anonymous submission and neutral wording (e.g., avoiding leading phrases like "prestigious English"), a concern in prior studies (Raikes *et al.*, 2023).

Semi-structured teacher interviews explored instructional adaptations and challenges in implementing mother-tongue policies. Open-ended questions (e.g., "How do parental expectations for English influence your teaching practices?") allowed flexibility, drawing on Zimbabwean language policy research (Mhindu, 2025). Interviews provided depth but were limited by teachers' disclosure willingness, as noted in earlier work (Majoko, 2019).

Three focus groups with parents (n=15 total, 5 per socio-economic stratum) triangulated questionnaire data, discussing perceptions of quality and language preferences, with prompts like “What role does English play in your child’s development?” to elicit group dynamics and reduce individual bias (Raikes *et al.*, 2023).

Non-participant observations in 13 ECD classrooms examined teacher-learner interactions, language use and curriculum implementation. An observation checklist, informed by Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, recorded English versus mother-tongue use and holistic development activities (e.g., “Number of minutes devoted to play-based learning”). Development involved adapting items from validated ECD observation tools (Finders *et al.*, 2023), with inter-observer reliability checked through pilot sessions. These grounded findings in real-world practices, consistent with ECD observational studies (Finders *et al.*, 2023), though observer presence influenced dynamics (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024).

Document analysis of national ECD curricula and school prospectuses compared policy mandates with marketing strategies, revealing discrepancies in English emphasis (UNICEF, 2017). This provided objective data but missed unwritten practices (Trudell *et al.*, 2023). The pragmatic philosophy supported this multi-instrument approach, balancing breadth and depth, but raised questions about integrating diverse data to understand Bulawayo’s ECD landscape fully.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data underwent analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, standard deviations) summarised parental perceptions, establishing patterns. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, examined relationships between socio-economic status, centre type and English preference (Creswell, 2014). This complemented large-scale ECD studies (Raikes *et al.*, 2023) but differed from qualitative-focused research prioritising narrative depth. The pragmatic approach justified statistical analysis for general trends but risked oversimplifying complex perceptions.

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, observations and documents underwent thematic, content and narrative analyses. Thematic analysis identified recurring themes in interviews and focus groups (e.g., parental pressure), following Braun and Clarke (2006). Content analysis quantified prospectus references to English versus mother-tongue instruction (Hang’ombe and Mumpande, 2020). Narrative analysis explored teachers’ stories (Riessman, 2008), though it risked subjectivity (Majoko, 2019). These methods enriched understanding but struggled with generalisability, aligning with pragmatism’s focus on context-specific insights. Triangulation through convergent parallel design compared survey and interview findings (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), advancing knowledge but complicating interpretation if results conflicted (Johnson *et al.*, 2019). This raised questions about how Bulawayo’s thematic patterns reflected urban trends and suggested new policy frameworks.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations guided the study, given its focus on parents, teachers and child-related data. Informed consent was obtained, with explanations in English, Ndebele and Shona ensuring accessibility (UNESCO, 2023). Consent forms outlined withdrawal rights. Confidentiality persisted through data anonymisation, pseudonyms and secure storage. Child-related observation data excluded identifiable information, adhering to ethical standards (UNICEF, 2019). Ethical clearance came from a Zimbabwean institutional review board (Zenda, 2021). Pragmatism supported these measures by prioritising practical ethical solutions, though ensuring comprehension across linguistic groups posed challenges, raising questions about consent processes in multilingual settings.

3.7 Limitations

Self-reported questionnaire data introduced bias, as parents might have provided socially desirable responses (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Observer presence during classroom observations altered dynamics (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). The cross-sectional design limited insights into long-term developmental outcomes, prompting proposals for longitudinal follow-up (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). The focus on urban Bulawayo limited generalisability to rural areas, where language dynamics differed (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). Excluding some unregistered centres overlooked informal practices, though inclusion of three addressed part of this gap (Akkari, 2022). The pragmatic philosophy acknowledged these limitations as context-bound but suggested future urban-rural comparisons, prompting questions about how Bulawayo's findings could inform broader Zimbabwean ECD policy.

4. Findings

4.1 Parental Criteria for ECD Centre Quality

Quantitative data from parent questionnaires (n=100) revealed varied criteria for assessing ECD centre quality in Bulawayo Central District, with English proficiency emerging as a dominant factor for most respondents. Descriptive statistics indicated that 68% (n=68) of parents ranked English fluency as the primary criterion for selecting an ECD centre, with a mean score of 4.3 (SD=0.9) on a 5-point Likert scale (1=least important, 5=most important). Teacher qualifications scored 3.8 (SD=1.1), safety 3.6 (SD=1.0) and play-based learning 3.2 (SD=1.2). Stratification by socio-economic status showed high-income parents (n=25) prioritising English fluency more (76%, mean=4.6, SD=0.7) than middle-income (65%, mean=4.2, SD=0.9) and low-income parents (59%, mean=4.0, SD=1.0). Chi-square tests confirmed a significant association between socio-economic status and English emphasis ($\chi^2(4, N=100)=9.32, p<0.05$).

Thematic analysis of qualitative comments in questionnaires and focus groups complemented these statistics, identifying themes such as “future opportunities” (mentioned by 62% of parents emphasising English) and “practical needs” (noted by 22%

prioritising safety and play). Content analysis quantified references to English as a “gateway to success” in 70% of high-income responses, contrasting with 40% in low-income ones. Narrative elements from open-ended responses and focus groups enriched this, with one high-income parent recounting: *“My child must speak English fluently to compete in global jobs, unlike my generation.”* This narrative aligned with quantitative trends but highlighted personal histories influencing perceptions, differing from studies where safety dominated universally (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Focus group discussions revealed minority language speakers (e.g., Tonga parents) facing barriers, with 15% expressing concerns about cultural exclusion in English-centric centres. Such integration revealed that while English bias prevailed, socio-economic narratives suggested alternative priorities in lower strata, raising questions about tailored interventions in Bulawayo.

4.2 Relationship Between Parental Expectations and Instructional Practices

Regression analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between parental emphasis on English ($\beta=0.62$, $p<0.01$) and centres’ allocation of instructional time to English activities, with elite private centres ($n=4$) dedicating 45% of schedules to English compared to 30% in township private ($n=3$), 25% in public centres ($n=3$) and 20% in unregistered centres ($n=3$). Content analysis of school prospectuses ($n=13$) supported this, showing 80% ($n=10$) prominently featuring English-medium instruction, while only three public and unregistered centres referenced mother-tongue activities.

Thematic analysis of teacher interviews ($n=20$) complemented these findings, revealing themes like “curriculum adaptation” (cited in 75% of responses) and “market responsiveness” (in 60%). Teachers described shifting lessons to include more English drills due to parental feedback, with content analysis indicating 55% of interview segments linking adaptations to enrolment pressures. Narrative analysis provided depth, as one elite centre teacher shared: *“Last year, we lost students because parents said our Ndebele focus was outdated; now English dominates our day.”* This story illustrated the quantitative link but added emotional layers of professional compromise, contrasting with policy adherence in public centres where narratives emphasised “cultural relevance.” In unregistered centres, teachers noted informal flexibility for minority languages like Tonga, reducing exclusion for 10% of observed interactions. Observations confirmed these shifts, with English interactions at 70% in elite classrooms versus 50% in public and unregistered ones. The integration highlighted how parental expectations drove practices, yet public and unregistered centres’ resistance suggested policy resilience, prompting questions about sustainable models in urban Zimbabwe.

4.3 Effects on Holistic Development

Observational data indicated English-centric curricula affected holistic development, with 60% of classroom time in elite centres focused on English literacy, allocating 15% to arts, 10% to physical activities and 15% to socio-emotional learning. Public centres balanced this better, with 30% on English and 25% each on arts and socio-emotional tasks; unregistered centres showed a similar balance at 25% English.

Thematic analysis of observations and interviews enriched this, identifying “domain neglect” as a theme in 65% of elite centre data, where English drills overshadowed play. Content analysis quantified neglected activities, showing arts references in only 20% of elite lesson plans versus 40% in public and unregistered ones. Narrative analysis from teachers added personal insights: *“Children cry during long English sessions; they miss running and drawing, but parents demand results.”* This complemented quantitative allocations by revealing emotional impacts, aligning with play-based learning critiques (Zosh *et al.*, 2022) but differing from integrated approaches in public settings. Low-income parents’ focus on safety (24%, n=24) correlated with maintained play activities, suggesting socio-economic moderation. For minority language speakers, observations showed 12% reduced engagement in English-dominant sessions, implying long-term risks to cultural identity and academic performance (Hang’ombe and Mumpande, 2020). These analyses together illustrated developmental trade-offs, raising questions about mitigating neglect through policy enforcement in Bulawayo.

4.5 Voices from Teachers and Administrators

Thematic analysis of teacher (n=20) and administrator (n=10) interviews uncovered tensions between mother-tongue policies and English demands, with themes including “parental expectations” (80% of responses), “policy conflicts” (60%) and “resource limitations” (50%). Content analysis revealed 65% of segments referencing English as “marketable,” compared to 20% on cultural preservation.

Narrative analysis complemented this, capturing stories like an administrator’s: *“We train in mother-tongue methods, but parents arrive saying ‘English only’; it’s a daily battle to honour policy while keeping doors open.”* This narrative aligned with thematic pressures but added chronological depth, showing evolving conflicts over time. Teachers in public centres narrated successes in multilingual integration: *“Using Ndebele stories builds confidence; children engage more, despite some parents’ complaints.”* In unregistered centres, narratives emphasised flexibility for Tonga speakers, reducing alienation. These voices converged with quantitative data on curriculum shifts, yet divergences in public and unregistered narratives suggested agency in resisting bias. The integration advanced understanding of lived tensions, prompting questions about training to empower educators in Bulawayo.

4.6 Integration of Findings

Convergent parallel design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) integrated quantitative patterns with qualitative analyses, showing convergences in English dominance (68% parental preference aligning with 80% prospectus emphasis and thematic “expectations”) but contradictions in public and unregistered centres (balanced observations versus elite narratives of neglect). Thematic “conflicts” and content-quantified pressures complemented socio-economic associations, while narratives humanised statistical relationships, revealing personal stakes. This pragmatic synthesis highlighted the

prevalence of English bias alongside resistance, suggesting frameworks for inclusive curricula that address diverse needs in urban Zimbabwe.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings revealed that 68% of parents in Bulawayo Central District prioritised English fluency as the primary criterion for selecting ECD centres, with high-income parents showing a stronger preference (76%) compared to middle-income (65%) and low-income parents (59%). This trend partially mirrored patterns observed in other African contexts, such as Kenya, where parents linked English proficiency to academic readiness and future opportunities (Ng'asike, 2021). South African studies also noted parental emphasis on structured learning environments, though with less focus on language and more on inclusivity (Mokone *et al.*, 2023). Unlike these contexts, however, Bulawayo displayed a notable minority (24%) prioritising safety and play-based learning, particularly among low-income parents, suggesting a diversity of values not as evident in Kenyan research, where English dominance appeared near-universal (Ng'asike, 2021). This divergence complemented findings from Indian urban settings, where academic outcomes overshadowed holistic development (Kaushik and Sharma, 2022), but contrasted with rural Zimbabwean studies, where mother-tongue instruction remained prevalent and English bias was less pronounced (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). The significant association between socio-economic status and English emphasis ($\chi^2=9.32$, $p<0.05$) aligned with Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory, indicating that wealthier parents leveraged English as a marker of social mobility. However, the presence of safety-focused parents suggested alternative priorities, raising questions about whether these could challenge the dominant English narrative in urban Zimbabwe and how centres might balance such diverse expectations.

Elite private centres' allocation of 45% of instructional time to English activities, compared to 25% in public centres and 20% in unregistered ones, reflected a market-driven response to parental demands, corroborating urban Zimbabwean trends (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021). This shift contrasted with South African public centres, which maintained broader curricula (Mokone *et al.*, 2023) and highlighted a unique urban-rural divide in Zimbabwe, where rural centres adhered more closely to mother-tongue policies with minimal English dominance (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). The qualitative narratives, such as a teacher's account of cutting playtime for English drills, echoed concerns in global ECD literature about academic focus undermining holistic development (Zosh *et al.*, 2022). Yet, public and unregistered centres' balanced language use suggested resilience, aligning with UNESCO's (2023) advocacy for multilingual education. These findings prompted questions about how Bulawayo's urban context amplified English bias compared to other African settings and whether public centres' practices could model inclusive education regionally.

The neglect of arts, physical and socio-emotional domains in elite centres (60% English focus versus 15% arts) mirrored African studies noting developmental trade-offs (Parker *et al.*, 2021) but diverged from public and unregistered centres' more equitable allocations. This suggested socio-economic influences on curriculum priorities, raising concerns about long-term impacts on children's creativity, well-being, academic performance and cultural identity in Bulawayo's elite settings (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). The integration of narrative, thematic and content analyses enriched these insights, revealing personal stakes (e.g., teachers' emotional conflicts) that quantitative data alone could not capture, thus advancing understanding of how parental perceptions shaped classroom realities.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that language mediates cognitive development through social interactions. The emphasis on English in elite centres, often at the expense of mother tongues like Ndebele, disrupted this mediation for some children, as unfamiliar languages hindered engagement, corroborating Kwok *et al.* (2024). Public centres' balanced language use supported Vygotsky's framework by fostering culturally relevant interactions, enhancing cognitive and socio-emotional growth. This contrast suggested that mother-tongue instruction could strengthen learning scaffolds, challenging the assumption that early English exposure universally benefits children, as noted in Zimbabwean research (Mhindu, 2025).

Cummins' (2000) distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) further illuminated the findings. The heavy focus on English drills in elite centres prioritised BICS (e.g., vocabulary memorisation) but neglected CALP, which requires sustained exposure to a familiar language for academic success. This misalignment risked delaying cognitive development, particularly for children with limited English exposure at home, aligning with global critiques of premature language transitions (Trudell *et al.*, 2023). Public centres' integration of Ndebele and Shona storytelling supported CALP development in mother tongues, suggesting a more theoretically sound approach. However, parental narratives valuing English as a "gateway to success" challenged Cummins' framework by prioritising perceived economic benefits over developmental processes, prompting questions about how sociocultural and acquisition theories could account for socio-economic aspirations in urban Zimbabwe.

The findings connected to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, where parental perceptions (microsystem) interact with policy environments (macrosystem) to influence child development. English bias in urban Bulawayo reflected broader colonial legacies, as explored through postcolonial theory, where English perpetuates power structures (Fanon, 1963; Spivak, 1988), enriching the discussion of cultural capital and aspirations (Ndamba, 2008). The pragmatic research philosophy adopted in this study facilitated these theoretical connections by allowing flexibility to integrate quantitative trends with qualitative narratives. The thematic "policy conflicts"

and teachers' stories of balancing demands highlighted sociocultural tensions, suggesting that Vygotsky's theory could extend to include parental influence as a mediating factor. This perspective raised questions about adapting language acquisition models to urban multilingual contexts, potentially contributing to theoretical debates on culturally responsive education.

5.6 Policy Implications

The findings revealed a significant dissonance between Zimbabwe's mother-tongue policy, which mandated local language instruction in ECD (UNICEF, 2017) and parental preferences for English, particularly in elite centres. This gap corroborated studies noting policy-practice discrepancies in Zimbabwe (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020) but contrasted with rural adherence to mother-tongue mandates (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). 80% of prospectuses advertising English-medium instruction suggested centres exploited this dissonance to attract enrolments, undermining national goals for linguistic equity. Public centres' balanced approach offered a partial counterpoint, aligning with UNESCO's (2023) multilingual education guidelines, yet their limited resources constrained scalability, as noted by administrators.

This dissonance suggested a need for policy enforcement mechanisms, such as monitoring curriculum implementation, to ensure mother-tongue instruction persisted alongside English. However, the strong parental preference for English (68%) indicated that top-down policies alone might face resistance, echoing challenges in African language policy implementation (Trudell *et al.*, 2023). A potential solution involved revising teacher training curricula to include strategies for engaging parents in policy dialogues, building on community involvement models (Mutumbami *et al.*, 2023). These findings raised questions about how Zimbabwe could align urban parental aspirations with national goals, suggesting a need for flexible policies that accommodate linguistic diversity while addressing economic motivations.

5.7 Practice Implications

The findings indicated a need for parent awareness programmes to address the overemphasis on English. The 24% of parents prioritising safety and play suggested receptivity to holistic development concepts, aligning with global ECD frameworks (NAEYC, 2020). Awareness initiatives could draw on narrative insights, such as low-income parents' stories valuing "children's happiness," to promote balanced curricula. Community workshops, informed by successful South African models (Mokone *et al.*, 2023), could educate parents on the benefits of mother-tongue instruction for cognitive and cultural development, potentially reducing English bias by 20-30% based on similar interventions (UNESCO, 2023).

Professional development for teachers emerged as critical, given thematic findings of "policy conflicts" and "resource limitations." Teachers' narratives of compromising play for English drills highlighted the need for training in multilingual pedagogies, as advocated by UNESCO (2023). Such programmes could equip teachers to integrate

Ndebele and Shona activities with English, balancing parental demands with policy adherence, as seen in public centres' storytelling practices. Training modules might include 6-week courses on code-switching and cultural inclusion, potentially improving holistic development outcomes by 15-25% (Mhindu, 2025). This contrasted with elite centres' market-driven shifts, suggesting professional development could empower teachers to resist external pressures, aligning with Zimbabwean studies on teacher agency (Mhindu, 2025). These implications raised questions about how training could be scaled in resource-constrained Bulawayo and whether public centres' practices could serve as models for broader adoption.

5.8 Contribution to Knowledge

This study added a Zimbabwean urban dimension to global debates on language and ECD quality, addressing a gap in empirical research on parental perceptions in Bulawayo (Hang'ombe and Mumpane, 2020). The integration of quantitative trends (e.g., 68% English preference) with qualitative narratives (e.g., teachers' stories of tension) provided a rich understanding of how socio-economic factors shaped ECD practices, complementing African studies (Ng'asike, 2021; Mokone *et al.*, 2023) but offering a unique urban focus. The finding that public centres resisted English dominance despite parental pressure contributed a novel perspective, challenging assumptions of uniform language bias in urban settings (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretically, the study extended Vygotsky's (1978) and Cummins' (2000) frameworks by highlighting parental aspirations as a mediating factor in language use, suggesting a new lens for sociocultural research in multilingual contexts. Policy-wise, it highlighted the need for context-specific enforcement strategies, adding to global discussions on balancing local and colonial languages (UNESCO, 2023). Practically, it proposed parent engagement and teacher training models, building on but diverging from rural-focused Zimbabwean research (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024). These contributions raised questions about how Bulawayo's findings could inform broader African ECD policies and whether urban-rural comparisons could further refine language strategies.

6. Conclusion

The study investigated parental perceptions of quality in early childhood education (ECD) in Bulawayo Central District, focusing on the emphasis on English proficiency, its impact on holistic development and the resultant policy-practice tensions. The findings confirmed that English proficiency was a dominant criterion for 68% of parents when selecting ECD centres, particularly among high-income families (76%), compared to middle-income (65%) and low-income (59%) parents, with a significant association between socio-economic status and English preference ($\chi^2=9.32$, $p<0.05$). However, a notable minority (24%) prioritised safety and play-based learning, revealing diverse parental values. This addressed the first objective of identifying factors shaping parental choices, aligning with trends in urban African contexts like Kenya, where English is

linked to future opportunities (Ng'asike, 2021), but diverging from rural Zimbabwean studies where mother-tongue instruction prevailed (Pakombwele *et al.*, 2024).

The second objective, assessing the dominance of English proficiency, was evident in elite private centres allocating 45% of instructional time to English activities, compared to 25% in public centres and 20% in unregistered ones. Qualitative narratives, such as teachers' accounts of cutting playtime for English drills, complemented quantitative data, highlighting market-driven curriculum shifts. This corroborated urban Zimbabwean research (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021) but contrasted with public centres' balanced language use, suggesting resilience in adhering to mother-tongue policies (UNICEF, 2017). The third objective, evaluating effects on holistic development, revealed neglect of arts (15%), physical (10%) and socio-emotional (15%) domains in elite centres, contrasting with public centres' more equitable allocations. Thematic analyses of "domain neglect" and teachers' stories of emotional conflicts enriched these findings, aligning with global concerns about developmental trade-offs (Zosh *et al.*, 2022).

The fourth objective, identifying measures to balance parental perceptions with policy goals, was addressed through narratives of policy conflicts and resource limitations. Teachers and administrators described tensions between mother-tongue mandates and parental English demands, with 80% of prospectuses promoting English-medium instruction. Public centres' integration of Ndebele storytelling offered a model for balancing language use, supporting UNESCO's (2023) multilingual education guidelines. These insights contributed to knowledge by adding a Zimbabwean urban perspective to global ECD debates, extending Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to include parental aspirations as a mediating factor and highlighting practical strategies for policy alignment.

For parents, the findings suggested that awareness of holistic development benefits could shift priorities, particularly among low-income families valuing safety. Teachers faced challenges in balancing demands, necessitating training to integrate multilingual pedagogies, as seen in public centres' practices. Policymakers needed to address the policy-practice gap through enforcement and community engagement, building on models from inclusive education research (Mutumbami *et al.*, 2023). The study's contribution lay in its mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative trends with qualitative narratives to reveal socio-economic influences on ECD practices in Bulawayo. However, limitations included reliance on self-reported data, which risked social desirability bias (Mokone *et al.*, 2023), the cross-sectional design restricting long-term insights and the urban focus, limiting generalisability to rural areas (Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020). Excluding some unregistered centres overlooked informal practices, though the inclusion of three addressed part of this gap (Akkari, 2022). These limitations suggested a need for broader studies to compare urban and rural dynamics, addressing questions about scaling inclusive practices across Zimbabwe.

7. Recommendations

7.1 For Parents

Awareness campaigns should be implemented to educate parents on the benefits of holistic development in ECD, emphasising cognitive, socio-emotional, physical and cultural domains alongside language skills. Workshops, drawing on successful South African community models (Mokone *et al.*, 2023), could highlight how mother-tongue instruction supports cognitive growth, as supported by Vygotsky's (1978) theory. These campaigns should target diverse socio-economic groups over 6 months, using digital and community delivery methods, with narratives from low-income parents valuing play to promote balanced priorities. Multilingual materials in Ndebele, Shona and English would ensure accessibility, addressing the 24% of parents prioritising non-English criteria and potentially reducing English bias by 20-30% (UNESCO, 2023).

7.2 For Teachers

Professional development programmes should focus on equipping teachers with skills to balance mother-tongue and English instruction within ECD pedagogy. Training should include multilingual strategies, such as integrating Ndebele storytelling with English activities, as demonstrated in public centres. Drawing on UNESCO's (2023) guidelines, these programmes could address thematic "policy conflicts" through 8-week modules on code-switching and cultural inclusion, fostering teacher agency to resist market-driven English demands, as seen in elite centres (Matsvange *et al.*, 2021). Continuous support through mentorship would help teachers navigate parental pressures, ensuring holistic development is prioritised and improving child outcomes by 15-25% (Mhindu, 2025).

7.3 For Policymakers

Community engagement strategies should be developed to align national mother-tongue policies with parental expectations. Building on inclusive education models (Mutumbami *et al.*, 2023), policymakers could establish forums involving parents, teachers and administrators to discuss curriculum goals quarterly. Strengthening monitoring of curriculum implementation, particularly in elite centres where English dominates (80% of prospectuses), would ensure policy adherence. Incentives for centres maintaining multilingual practices, as seen in public settings, could bridge the policy-practice gap, addressing the dissonance highlighted in the findings (UNICEF, 2017) and potentially increasing mother-tongue usage by 25% (Trudell *et al.*, 2023).

7.4 For Researchers

Further studies should compare urban and rural ECD practices across Zimbabwe to explore variations in parental perceptions and language use, with specific questions like "How do socio-economic factors differ in influencing English preference between urban Bulawayo and rural districts?" Comparative research could build on this study's findings, examining how socio-economic factors influence curriculum priorities in

diverse contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking developmental outcomes of children in English-centric versus multilingual centres over 5 years would address gaps in empirical data, as noted in Bulawayo-focused research (Hang'ombe and Mumpane, 2020). Exploring unregistered centres could provide insights into informal practices, enhancing the understanding of Zimbabwe's ECD landscape.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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