AN INVESTIGATION INTO TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON SCHOOL READINESS ASSESSMENT IN CHOMA DISTRICT ZAMBIA

By

Phiri Sylvia

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I, Sylvia Phiri, declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted to any other institution or university for the award of a degree. I have appropriately referenced all sources of information used in this thesis, and I am solely responsible for any errors or omissions.

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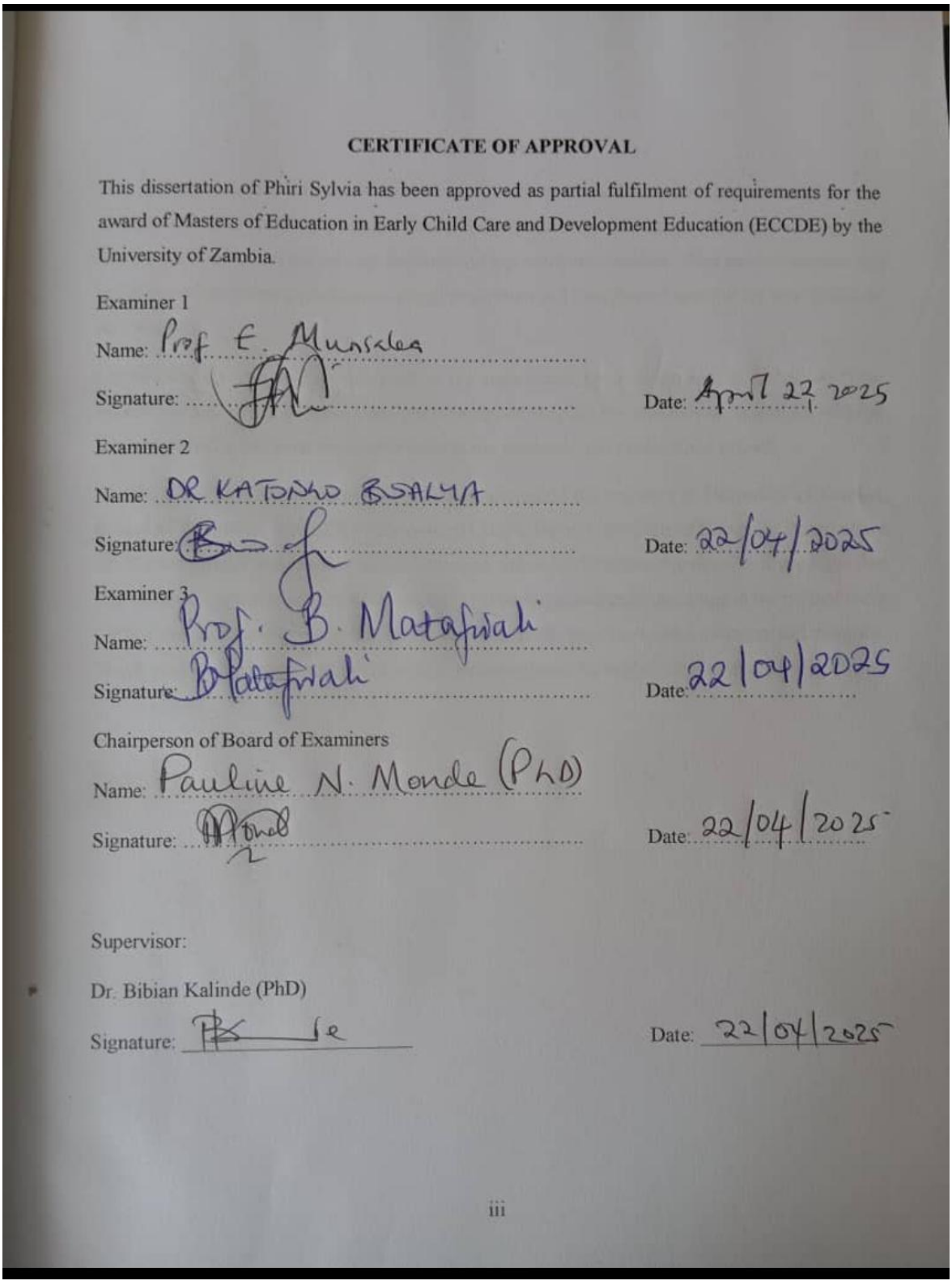

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This dissertation of Phiri Sylvia has been approved as partial fulfilment of requirements for the award of Masters of Education in Early Child Care and Development Education (ECCDE) by the University of Zambia.

Examiner 1

Name: Prof E. Munsaka

Signature: ..... Date: April 22 2025

Examiner 2

Name: DR KATONGO BUSAKWA

Signature: ..... Date: 22/04/2025

Examiner 3

Name: Prof. B. Matafwali

Signature: ..... Date: 22/04/2025

Chairperson of Board of Examiners

Name: Pauline N. Monde (PhD)

Signature: ..... Date: 22/04/2025

Supervisor:

Dr. Bibian Kalinde (PhD)

Signature: ..... Date: 22/04/2025

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful mum, Beatrice Liywali, my husband Christopher, my children Muumbe Rebbecca, Moono Sara and Christopher Jnr Muntanga. Your unwavering love and support have been the driving force behind my academic pursuits. Your encouragement and belief in me have been a constant source of inspiration and I am forever grateful for your guidance and wisdom.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions on school readiness assessment practices in Choma District primary schools. Using a qualitative approach and a case design, data were generated through interviews and focus group discussions with 20 participants, including ECE teachers and school managers. The study employed purposive sampling technique to select the sample size. Expert purposive sampling was employed to select ECE teachers. For school managers, homogenous sampling technique was used. The findings revealed that ECE teachers primarily relied on basic assessment tools such as the observation, which was deemed insufficient for effectively evaluating school readiness. Assessment practices across the district lacked consistency, as they were largely dependent on teacher-created methods. Limited training on advanced assessment techniques further hindered comprehensive evaluations of learners. Teachers also faced significant challenges, including resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate classroom space, insufficient teaching and learning materials, limited parental involvement, and a lack of professional development opportunities. The study concluded that there is an urgent need for the introduction of more structured and specialized assessment tools, as well as increased support for teachers through resources and professional development programmes, to improve school readiness evaluations. In addition, schools could foster stronger communication with parents and the community to encourage greater involvement in their children's education. Further studies could also investigate the role of parental involvement in enhancing school readiness in ECE classrooms, examining strategies to effectively engage parents in supporting their children's early learning at home and school.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ECE	-	Early Childhood Education
ECCED	-	Early Childhood Care Education and Development
CDA	-	Care for Development Appraisal
ICLAP	-	Instrument for Children Literacy Attended Progress
PIPS	-	Performance Indicators in Primary Schools
MDAT	-	Malawi Developmental Assessment Tools
CDATZ	-	Child Development Assessment Tool of Zambia
MoE	-	Ministry of Education
NCP	-	National Child Policy
ZOCS	-	Zambia Open Community Schools

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter overview

This section presents the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study and the research objectives. It further highlights the research questions, and significance of the study as well as the limitations and delimitations of the study and the methodology for data collection.

1.2 Background of the study

In Zambia, early childhood education is recognized as a critical component of a child's development. Research by Earle et al. (2018) highlights that participation in Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development (ECCED) programmes significantly enhances children's readiness for school. Early Childhood Care, Development, and Education (ECCDE) provides a strong foundation for lifelong learning and overall well-being, playing a pivotal role in children's holistic development (Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, 2013). Early childhood education significantly enhances children's school experiences in primary and basic education. The transition from early childhood education to early primary school is a crucial stage in a child's academic journey. The support and experiences children receive during this period play a vital role in shaping their future learning outcomes and overall adjustment (Musonda & Matafwali, 2023).

The transition from ECE to primary school requires careful planning and curriculum alignment to ensure that children are adequately prepared for the new academic environment. According to Bierman et al. (2008), fostering self-regulation and social competence in preschool programmes can lead to greater academic success in later years. Assessing school readiness in an important factor in determining the child's transition to primary school. School readiness, which indicates readiness of the individual child to enter school (Brooks & Murray, 2018), is a condition in which a child is ready to engage in learning experiences at school.

The rationale for school readiness assessment lies in ensuring that every child regardless of their right to education, is given the best possible foundation for learning and development. While education is a universal right, children enter school with different levels of preparedness due to variations in their early childhood experiences, socio-economic backgrounds, nutrition and

cognitive development (Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, 2013). School readiness assessments do not determine whether a child has the right to education but rather ensure that every child benefits fully from their educational experience by addressing their specific developmental and learning needs early on (USAID, 2014).

In the early years, the assessment of school readiness in Zambia was primarily based on traditional practices and cultural norms (Davis, 2018). For instance, families in rural areas relied on informal methods, such as observing their child's ability to carry out domestic chores or engaging in agricultural tasks. These activities were seen as indicators of a child's readiness to embark on formal schooling while teachers relied on methods such as putting the right hand over the head to reach the left ear (Whittaker, 2017). However, as the country progressed and urbanized, the education system adopted more standardised assessment methods, aligning with global trends (Whittaker, 2017). Over the years, the assessment of school readiness in Zambia has also been influenced by the government's emphasis on ECE (Halle, 2020).

The Zambian government has made significant strides in promoting ECE through various policy frameworks that emphasise school readiness assessment. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy (2013) highlights school readiness as a critical component of child development, recognizing the need for structured assessments to ensure that children acquire foundational skills before entering primary school. To operationalise this, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has integrated school readiness assessment within the Zambian School Curriculum Framework (2013), outlining key developmental domains such as literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional skills, and cognitive abilities. Additionally, the Fifth National Development Plan (2006-2010) set a policy direction for increasing access to quality ECE, emphasizing that assessment practices should inform early interventions and tailor support for children at risk of falling behind. The National Child Policy (2015-2021) further reinforced this commitment by mandating the systematic tracking of children's developmental progress, ensuring that school readiness assessments are not only diagnostic but also instrumental in shaping early learning interventions.

The two types of assessments commonly used with preschool children are developmental screening tests and readiness tests. Developmental screening tests evaluate a child's attainment of motor, communication, sensory, or cognitive milestones to determine if they are progressing at

expected rates of maturation and learning (USAID, 2014). These assessments rely on normative or criterion-referenced frameworks and are often influenced by cultural contexts, necessitating adaptation to local settings (Gladstone et al., 2010). For instance, the Malawi Developmental Assessment Tool (MDAT) and the Kilifi Developmental Inventory have been developed specifically for African settings to assess domains like motor, language, and social skills (Abubaker et al., 2007; Boivin, Vokhiwa, & Magen, 2013). Predictive tools like the Zambian Child Assessment Test and the School Readiness Assessment focus on cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional skills (Fink et al., 2012; Save the Children, 2013).

Readiness tests, such as the Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) and the Care for Development Appraisal Tool (CDA), measure children's preparedness for classroom participation and identify those needing early intervention (Rafique & Nadeem, 2011; Tymms & Bailey, 2013). These tools assess domains such as reading, math, executive function, and personal-social development, often integrating context-specific modifications (Fink et al., 2012; Save the Children, 2013). Comprehensive scales like the Griffiths Mental Development Scales, Bayley Scales of Infant Development, and Mullen Scales of Early Development have also been adapted for African use, though their applicability varies across contexts (Kammerer, Isquith, & Lundy, 2013). While these tools offer insights into cognitive and academic skills, their effectiveness is influenced by the extent of cultural relevance and adaptation (Gee & Adelman, 2013).

The determination of school readiness in early childhood education is a multifaceted process encompassing various developmental domains. As outlined in the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013), the assessment involves evaluating a child's physical development, including gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and overall health. Additionally, the appraisal extends to social and emotional development, covering aspects such as self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and interactions with others. Cognitive development is also a crucial focus, involving assessments of language and literacy skills, numeracy proficiency, and problem-solving abilities (Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, 2013). Furthermore, the evaluation includes an exploration of creative development, encompassing a child's imagination, creativity, and self-expression, (Zambia Education Curriculum Framework 2013).

To conduct these assessments, a combination of standardised tools, teacher observations, and parental input is employed, adapting to the child's age and the specific ECE setting. The overarching goals of ECE, as stipulated in the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013), are to foster the holistic development of children, preparing them for success in primary school and providing a secure and nurturing learning environment. The policy identifies several indicators for measuring school readiness, ranging from a child's ability to follow instructions and communicate effectively to their problem-solving skills and emotional regulation. In response to these goals, the Zambian government has implemented various initiatives, including expanding access to ECE centers, developing a national ECE curriculum, investing in teacher training, and engaging parents in supporting their children's learning at home. (Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013).

Further, the Zambian School Curriculum Framework of 2013 acknowledges the importance of ECE and the readiness of children to start schooling. The curriculum recognizes that children need to be equipped with a foundation of skills and knowledge before they can effectively engage in formal education. Additionally, the Ministry of Education (MoE) through the Fifth National Development Plan 2006-2010, a policy paper outlining educational provision by the MoE recognized ECE readiness as an essential part of the education system, stating that ECE is the foundation for lifelong learning and development. The Ministry set out a number of goals for ECE, including to increase access to quality ECE for all children entering school, regardless of their background or location through the Directorate of Early Childhood Education (MoE, 2010). The Policy Objectives of the Directorate include 1) to improve the quality of ECE service provision through curriculum implementation and quality assurance. 2) To establish an evidence-based performance management system that demonstrates the contribution of ECE to learner development and 3) to increase the number of children receiving ECE services through school readiness assessment. The National Child Policy 2015 - 2021 (NCP) highlights that the government of Zambia developed and implemented a system of ECE development and assessment to track progress towards achieving ECE goals and identify children who need additional support as they enter primary education.

Despite the positive outcomes of these programmes, gaps remain in effectively assessing school readiness, particularly in rural areas. Factors such as socioeconomic disparities, parental involvement, and infrastructure play a critical role in determining how well children are prepared for the transition to primary school (Mambwe, Phiri, Kalinde, Sichula, & Kaluba, 2024). Moreover, the lack of standardised assessment tools and cohesive transition programmes between ECE and primary school exacerbate these challenges, leading to mismatches in instructional approaches and children's readiness levels. A key factor influencing school readiness in Zambia is parental involvement. Studies show that parents' active participation in their children's early education significantly enhances their readiness for school (Mambwe et al., 2024). However, limited awareness and financial constraints often hinder parents' ability to support their children's learning at home. These socioeconomic challenges also affect the availability of learning materials, such as books and educational toys, which are crucial for fostering cognitive development in young children (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Moreover, the teacher-to-child ratio is alarmingly high at 1-80, far exceeding the recommended 1:20, with many teachers (Kaunda, 2023) untrained. Inadequate facilities and educational materials are some other infrastructure and resource related challenges faced (NegoPolis, 2024).

According to Musonda and Matafwali (2023), teachers play a crucial role in determining how much children learn. Their perspectives on school readiness and transitions influence how they interact with students, which in turn shapes the learning experiences of children in early childhood education (ECE) and grade one. Teachers' perceptions of their students have significant long-term effects, as their expectations can either support or hinder a child's success in school. Despite, there is little literature on teacher perceptions on school readiness assessment in Zambia As such, it was significant to investigate the teacher's perception of early childhood education school readiness assessment.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The transition from early childhood to primary education is a critical phase in a child's academic journey, significantly influencing their future success (Mbewe & Zimba, 2017). While efforts have been made in Zambia to enhance the quality and accessibility of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and to recognize its importance, the practices employed by ECE teachers to determine learners'

readiness for primary school remain under-explored, particularly in Choma District. Lungu (2022), in her study on assessment practices in ECE centers in Lusaka, highlights the lack of clarity on how children should be assessed at different stages of development. This gap is further compounded by ambiguities in the revised curriculum, which does not provide clear guidelines for evaluating learners' readiness for primary education (Kapenda & Besa, 2019).

The 2019 Early Learning Development Survey in Zambia highlights a significant concern: only 28% of children aged 3-5 demonstrate the necessary skills for school readiness. This statistic underscores the broader challenge of ensuring children are adequately prepared for primary education. However, while much of the existing research focuses on learner outcomes, there is a notable gap in understanding how early childhood education (ECE) teachers perceive and assess school readiness. Given that teachers play a crucial role in shaping children's learning experiences (Musonda & Matafwali, 2023), their perspectives on readiness assessment practices are fundamental to improving early learning interventions.

Despite the growing awareness of low school readiness levels, little is known about the specific challenges ECE teachers face in assessing and fostering readiness. Kapenda & Besa (2019) highlight the importance of aligning assessment practices with the realities of classroom instruction, yet inconsistencies in assessment approaches may hinder efforts to support learners effectively. By examining teachers' views in Choma District, this study aims to bridge the gap between insights on school readiness and the practical challenges educators encounter. Understanding teachers' perceptions will provide valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities for enhancing school readiness assessment practices, ultimately informing policy and training interventions to improve early childhood education outcomes in Zambia.

1.4 Purpose of the study

This study aimed to investigate current practices in school readiness, examine teachers' perceptions of school readiness, and identify the challenges associated with school readiness assessments.

1.5 Objectives

i. To establish current practices in school readiness assessments in ECE centers in Choma district.

ii. To examine the perceptions of ECE teachers in assessing school readiness in ECE centers in Choma District.

iii. To evaluate challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments.

1.6 Research Questions

i. How are school readiness assessments currently being conducted in ECE centers in Choma district?

ii. How do ECE teachers in Choma District perceive school readiness assessments?

iii. What challenges do ECE teachers face when conducting school readiness assessments in Choma district?

1.7 Significance of the study

This study is a contribution to the body of knowledge on Early Childhood Education in Zambia. The research findings are relevant towards informing and improving policy formulation and implementation on the subject matter. As such, the study is contributing towards achieving the national development plans such as the Eighth National Development Plan 2022-2023. In addition, this study is also a contribution towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially Goal 4 ‘Quality Education’ offering quality, equitable and inclusive education.

By understanding the experiences of ECE teachers in assessing children's readiness for primary education, the study will provide valuable insights into how to enhance the effectiveness of early childhood education programmes. ECE teachers play a critical role in this process, and their

experience will inform how assessment practices can be improved to better support children's transition to primary education. By investigating their perspectives and experiences, the study can shed light on the challenges they face and the strategies they use to assess school readiness. This will inform professional development programmes and policies to support ECE teachers in their roles. In addition, it will also help the headteachers and other teachers in coming up with best ways of assessing children entering grade.

1.8 Theoretical framework

Social constructivism, developed by Lev Vygotsky, posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and cultural contexts. It emphasises the role of dialogue and collaboration in learning, suggesting that cognitive development occurs within the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), where learners achieve more with guidance from knowledgeable others (Thinkific, 2024; Ecampus Ontario, n.d). Unlike individualistic theories, social constructivism views learning as inherently social, highlighting the importance of community and shared experiences in shaping understanding (The Open University, n.d). This approach has significant implications for educational practices, advocating for collaborative learning environments (Saleem et al, 2022).

Social constructivism emphasises that learning occurs through interaction with peers, teachers, and the community (Thinkific, 2024). In the context of assessing teacher perceptions on school readiness assessment in Choma District, Zambia, this feature guided the study to focus on how teachers collaborate and communicate to evaluate school readiness. Teachers' perceptions may be shaped through their professional discussions, experiences with parents, and shared cultural expectations of children's preparedness for school. The theory highlights that teachers' understanding of readiness emerges not in isolation but through interactions within their professional and social networks (Saleem, 2022).

Further, the theory places teachers as active participants in shaping knowledge and understanding, which is crucial in assessing school readiness (Ecampus Ontario, n.d.). Teachers' participation in workshops, discussions, or field assessments allows them to form their perceptions about what constitutes school readiness. This active involvement also highlights their role as agents who interpret and apply policies or assessment tools in the local context (Thinkific, 2024). Therefore,

understanding their participation can reveal how these experiences influence their views on the effectiveness or limitations of readiness assessments.

According to Saleem et al (2022) social constructivism emphasises the role of culture and societal norms in shaping learning processes and perceptions. When assessing teacher perceptions on school readiness, it is essential to explore how the local cultural context influences their views. Factors such as community values, family roles, and socio-economic conditions may affect how teachers define and assess a child's preparedness for school (Western Governors University, 2005). Readiness might focus not only on academic skills but also on social behaviors, independence, and adaptability shaped by cultural expectations. This feature allows the study to highlight the unique cultural dynamics that inform teachers' perceptions and assessments.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that individuals achieve higher understanding with support from more knowledgeable others (Western Governors University, 2005). In this study, the ZPD was used to assess how teachers' knowledge and perceptions of school readiness are enhanced through collaboration, mentoring, and professional development. Teachers in Choma District might benefit from working with educational specialists, participating in peer learning, or receiving training on school readiness assessment tools. This guided learning helps teachers refine their perceptions, ensuring they apply more effective and standardised readiness criteria (Thinkific, 2024). Investigating the ZPD in this context helped identify gaps in training and providing recommendations for enhancing teacher capacity.

In the study, the social constructivism theory guided the examination of how ECE teachers use a combination of standardised tools, observations, and parental input for assessing various domains of child development, including physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and creative aspects. This aligns with the goals outlined in the Zambian Ministry of Education's Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, which aims to promote holistic child development and prepare children for success in primary school. The study, informed by the social constructivism theory, explored how assessment practices not only provide insights into a child's readiness for formal schooling but also serve as a means to identify specific areas of strength and areas that may require additional support.

1.9 Limitations of study

The study was purely qualitative thus the results could not be generalised to other schools but only to the selected ECE centers in Choma district even though other school in the country could be facing the same challenges with assessment practices.

1.10 Delimitation of the study

Delimitations of the study aids in narrowing down the focus of the research and helps researchers avoid being too broad or too narrow in their investigation (Smith, 2021). The study was delimited to Choma district, Zambia, and was not be representative of school readiness assessment practices in other districts or regions within Zambia or in different countries. The focus was specifically investigating teacher perceptions on school readiness assessments practices in ECE centres in Choma District primary school. Assessments in other educational levels, such as secondary schools, were beyond the scope of this study. Further, the study focused on school readiness of learners from ECE to grade one.

1.11 Definition of terms

Assessment: Assessment is the process of gathering and evaluating information about learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Early Childhood Education (ECE): Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to the education and care of young children, typically from birth to age eight. ECE centres are annexed to primary schools.

Learner: A learner is a person who is actively engaged in the process of learning, acquiring new knowledge, skills, and attitudes through various means such as instruction, observation, and experience.

Primary Education: Primary education refers to the first stage of formal education, typically covering the ages of five to twelve years old.

School Entry: School entry refers to the point at which children begin formal education in a school setting.

School Readiness: School readiness refers to the set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that children need to be successful in their early years of formal education. In this study school readiness refers to the developmental stage at which a child possess the necessary cognitive, social-emotional, and physical skills to successfully engage in formal education. It encompasses a child's ability to follow instructions, communicate effectively. Interact with peers, and demonstrate basic pre-literacy and numeracy skills (UNICEF, 2012).

Teacher: A teacher is a person who is responsible for facilitating the learning of others.

1.12 Chapter summary

This section of the studied focused on presenting the introduction to the topic of the study. The chapter focused on key elements including, the background of the study; statement of the problem; objectives of the study that is, the general and specific objectives; research questions; significance of the study; theoretical framework; limitations of the study; delimitation of the study; and the definition of terms.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter overview

The section will cover the concept of school readiness, the domains of assessing school readiness, perceptions of teachers towards school readiness assessment, assessment tools commonly used and challenges faced by teachers when conducting school readiness assessment.

2.1 Historical perspective of school readiness

Throughout history, societies have recognized the importance of preparing children for formal schooling (Kit, 2019). According to Smith and Shepard (2015) the origins of assessing school readiness can be traced back to ancient civilizations, such as Ancient Greece and Rome, where formal education played a crucial role in society. In these societies, children had to demonstrate certain cognitive and physical abilities before they were considered ready for schooling. The assessment methods used during this time were largely based on observation and informal evaluations by parents and educators (Williams, 2019).

During the medieval period, education was predominantly provided by religious institutions. Assessing school readiness in this period was based on religious and moral criteria, with children being evaluated on their ability to recite prayers, demonstrate basic religious knowledge, and engage in appropriate behavior (Hamerslag, 2018). This approach reflected the importance placed on religious education at the time and served as a foundation for future assessments. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed significant advancements in the field of education, with the emergence of formal schooling systems. As education became more standardised, the need to assess school readiness became more apparent (Halle, 2020). This period saw the development of standardised assessments for school readiness that assessed children's cognitive and academic abilities. These focusedon areas such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and were used to determine a child's readiness for entry into formal education (Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin & Bryant, 2018).

In the early 20th century, the field of child psychology gained prominence, leading to a shift in assessing school readiness. Psychologists began emphasising the importance of considering a child's social, emotional, and physical development alongside cognitive abilities (Cohen, Rothbart

& Phillips, 2019). This holistic approach aimed to ensure that children were prepared not only academically but also emotionally and socially for the challenges of formal education. The mid-20th century saw the rise of educational theorists and researchers who further shaped the assessment of school readiness. Influential researchers, such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emphasised the role of play, social interaction, and hands-on experiences in a child's development (Miller, 2018). Assessments for school readiness during this period focused on measuring a child's ability to think critically, problem-solve, and engage in collaborative learning (Dweck, 2016).

In the latter half of the 20th century, the importance of early childhood education and kindergarten also grew. Readiness for school became more child-centered, with a focus on evaluating children's readiness to learn rather than simply evaluating their academic skills. Teachers and educators began to assess children's abilities in various domains, including language and communication, motor skills, and social-emotional development (Johnson, 2016). Today, the assessment of school readiness continues to evolve. Educators and policymakers recognize the need for comprehensive assessments that consider multiple domains of development, including cognitive, social-emotional, and physical skills (Jensen, Goldstein & Brunetti, 2021). The age of children entering primary school in many countries has different minimum limits. The majority of European nations set a minimum age of six years for entry into primary school, though some, like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Malta, begin at a younger age of five years and Northern Ireland at four, while Bulgaria, Finland, and some other nations begin at seven (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2018). In the US, children must start primary education at age 5, which includes a year of pre-school (Clark, 2017).

According to Greenberg Bierman (2018), assessing the readiness of children entering primary education is of paramount importance. Before a child begins formal education in a primary school, it is essential to determine their skills, abilities, and conduct. In general, the idea of school readiness has gained widespread acceptance at the pedagogical and practical levels of early childhood education and pre-school teacher education (Whittaker, 2017). According to research, learner school readiness scores in kindergarten predicted effective academic performance in subsequent years (i.e., middle school, reception) (Jensen et al., 2021; Slutzky & DeBruin-Parecki, 2019). According to Smith and Shepherd (2015), many ECE teachers believe that readiness develops with

age. According to a study conducted in the United States in 2020, kindergarteners who were starting school for the first time had certain challenges (Williams, 2019). Only two-thirds of children could identify their letters, while 29% could identify beginning sounds, 94% could identify single numerals and shapes and count to 10, 58% could count past 10, detect sequence patterns, and compare things based on lengths other than standard units (ibid).

The need for children to be prepared for school is expanding nationwide, yet the aims and objectives for doing so are undergoing constant change. When comparing research papers from different eras, it appears that the criteria for what constitutes school preparation are constantly changing. Teachers in 1989 emphasised cognitive skills such children understanding fundamental concepts like shape, number, and color recognition as the most crucial component of school preparedness (Hustedt et al., 2017). The topic of children's social and emotional development became one of the critical components of school readiness ten years later (Hustedt et al., 2017). With this change, teachers noted that when describing a learner's preparation for school, communication and emotional control abilities were more significant than academic ability (Hustedt et al., 2017; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Though most teachers claim that the academic domain is the least important for school readiness, academics continue to be a major emphasis of tests for kindergarten. Despite this perception, academic demands have been made on children and teachers, leading to a more structured environment in kindergarten (Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

2.2 Assessment practices by early childhood education teachers

Studies done by Bustamante et al., (2017) have shown that there are various domains of assessing school readiness. Understanding the various dimensions of school readiness is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers to support children effectively during this important phase. Some of the various domains include cognitive development, emotional readiness, as well as language and communication (Bustamante et al, 2017).

Cognitive development refers to a child's mental abilities, including problem-solving, language skills, and basic numeracy (The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). A child's capacity to think, learn, and process information is fundamental for success in a formal educational setting. This dimension involves skills like recognising letters and numbers, understanding basic concepts, and developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Attention and memory skills

are essential for a child to actively engage in learning tasks in school. Halle et al., (2020) suggests that sustained attention, selective attention, and inhibitory control play key roles in a child's readiness to follow instructions, concentrate on tasks, and ignore distractions. Problem-solving skills are critical for children to adapt and navigate through novel situations. Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasises the importance of problem-solving as a means for constructing knowledge (Johnson, 2016). Engaging children in play-based activities that require critical thinking and problem-solving can enhance their cognitive abilities and prepare them for school

According to Halle et al., (2020) social and emotional readiness encompasses a child's ability to interact positively with peers and adults, manage emotions, and navigate social situations. This dimension emphasises skills like sharing, cooperation, self-control, empathy, and the capacity to express feelings appropriately. Several theoretical frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and John Bowlby's attachment theory highlight the importance of social and emotional skills in school readiness (Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin and Bryant, 2018). Strong social and emotional foundations are essential for creating a positive classroom environment and establishing healthy relationships with teachers and peers (Dickinson & Neuman, 2017). A study conducted by Jones et al. (2017) found that children with better social skills demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement. This suggests that early interventions promoting social and emotional skills can enhance school readiness outcomes.

Further, research by Smith & Wilson (2021) found that language and communication skills are vital for effective learning and interaction in a school setting. This dimension involves not only the ability to speak and understand language but also the capacity to express thoughts, ask questions, and actively engage in conversations. Proficient language skills enable children to comprehend instructions, participate in classroom discussions, and express their ideas and needs effectively. Hamre et al (2018) further argued that motor skills encompass both fine and gross motor abilities. Fine motor skills involve tasks like writing, drawing, and manipulating small objects, while gross motor skills involve activities like running, jumping, and coordination of larger movements. According to Hamre et al. (2018) developed motor skills enable children to engage in classroom activities, participate in physical education, and complete tasks that require dexterity.

Apart from the various domains in understanding the current practices in school readiness, authors such as Pianta et al (2018), Davies et al (2018) and others unveil various methods developed to evaluate different dimensions of readiness, ranging from cognitive skills to social and emotional development. In today's educational landscape, assessing school readiness has become an essential process for teachers. It involves evaluating a child's preparedness for formal schooling, both academically and socially.

Standardised assessments are widely used tools to measure school readiness. These tests are designed to provide a standardised and objective measure of a child's skills and abilities in areas such as cognitive development, language proficiency, and motor skills (Pianta et al, 2018). While standardised assessments offer quantifiable data, critics argue that they may not capture the full spectrum of a child's readiness, potentially overlooking important socio-emotional and contextual factors.

In addition, observational methods as found by Davies et al (2018) involve systematic and structured observations of a child's behavior in various contexts, such as classroom settings or during play. Davis et al. (2018) suggest that this approach allows educators to assess a child's social skills, behavior, and interactions with peers and adults. Observational assessments provide rich, context-specific information, but may be time-intensive and require trained observers.

According to Mashburn et al. (2018) teachers play a pivotal role in assessing school readiness. Teacher-generated assessments involve the use of informal tools and observations based on their day-to-day interactions with learners. Moreover, parents and caregivers are valuable sources of information regarding a child's development and behavior. Parent-reported assessments often involve questionnaires or interviews to gather insights into a child's socio-emotional well-being, behavior, and daily routines (Miller, 2021). These assessments offer a holistic view of a child's readiness and can provide valuable context, but may be subject to response bias.

Studies by Brown et al. (2019) and Davis (2018) emphasise that teachers utilize a variety of assessment methods. These include observational techniques, standardised assessments, and teacher-created checklists. Research by (Clark & Green, 2020) has also shown that a combination of assessment methods and tools is most effective for assessing school readiness. Observation and

standardised assessments are particularly useful for assessing children's social-emotional development and their ability to learn in a classroom setting

In many educational contexts, including Zambia, school readiness assessments often rely on observational methods. According to Banda & Phiri (2021) these involve teachers observing children during play or structured activities to assess their developmental progress. Teachers might observe how children interact with peers, perform basic tasks like drawing or counting, and communicate. Observational checklists are commonly used to guide these evaluations. However, studies have shown that while observations are valuable, they may not always provide a comprehensive picture of a child's readiness, as they can be subjective and dependent on the teacher's interpretation (Banda & Phiri, 2021).

Observational assessments involve systematically watching and recording a child's behavior in different contexts. Research by Jones and Green (2019) highlights the effectiveness of this method in providing rich, qualitative data on a child's interactions, social skills, and cognitive abilities. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of the child's readiness. On the other hand, standardised assessments are structured tests that compare a child's performance to established norms. Studies by Brown et al. (2018) emphasise the utility of standardised tools in measuring specific cognitive and academic skills. These instruments offer standardised metrics for benchmarking readiness across a population. While Portfolio assessment involves collecting and evaluating a variety of a child's work samples, projects, and observations over time. Research by Johnson (2019) underscores the benefits of this method in showcasing a child's progress and development across different domains, including cognitive, social, and emotional areas.

A study by Smith and Glass (2019) found that teachers who used a combination of assessment methods, including observation, portfolios, and standardised assessments, were more likely to accurately identify children's school readiness than teachers who used only one assessment method. A study by Mashburn et al. (2018) found that children who scored well on screening tools at the beginning of kindergarten were more likely to be successful in kindergarten and first grade than children who scored poorly on screening tools. Another study by Pianta et al. (2018) found that teachers' observations of children's social-emotional development in kindergarten were predictive of children's academic success in first grade.

Both Mambwe et al. (2021) and Kalinde et al. (2021) address school readiness and transitions but from distinct angles. Mambwe et al. focus on the structural and contextual factors influencing transitions from early childhood education to primary school. Their findings emphasise challenges such as limited parental involvement, digital inequality, and the absence of well-structured transition programmes. Similarly, Kalinde et al. explore school readiness but place greater emphasis on play-based pedagogies as a tool for fostering readiness and holistic development. The alignment between the two studies lies in recognising parental involvement as a critical factor in school readiness and transitions. However, while Mambwe et al. highlight systemic barriers to parental engagement, Kalinde et al. focus on its positive influence without delving into the structural challenges that hinder it.

The significance of play-based pedagogy as a driver of holistic development is central to both Kalinde et al. (2021) and Munsaka and Kalinde (2017). Kalinde et al. identify specific play-based assessment strategies, such as observational assessments and teacher interviews, that support children's cognitive, social, and personal development. Similarly, Munsaka and Kalinde advocate for integrating storytelling, local games, and songs into ECE programmes foster socio-emotional and cognitive skills. Both studies emphasise the importance of culturally relevant practices. However, Munsaka and Kalinde go further by addressing the systemic challenges that hinder effective pedagogy, such as insufficient teacher training and reliance on unfamiliar languages of instruction. This contrasts with Kalinde et al., who largely overlook the practical implementation challenges of play-based pedagogy in resource-constrained environments.

Mambwe et al. (2021) highlight financial constraints and knowledge gaps as barriers to parental engagement, whereas Kalinde et al. (2021) underline the positive outcomes of parental involvement without addressing the systemic factors limiting it. Munsaka and Kalinde (2017) bridge this gap by advocating for parent-teacher collaboration as a means of enhancing learning outcomes. They emphasise that collaborative efforts can mitigate external barriers, such as limited parental availability or understanding of ECE practices. Despite these insights, none of the studies thoroughly examine how teachers perceive their role in fostering parent-teacher partnerships or how these perceptions influence school readiness assessments.

Finally, Mambwe et al. (2021) explore broader systemic dynamics but fail to capture how teachers perceive and adapt to mismatches in instructional approaches. Kalinde et al. (2021) focus on assessment methods like observational and play-based approaches but do not investigate how teachers view or implement these methods in under-resourced settings. Similarly, while Munsaka and Kalinde (2017) acknowledge the challenges of inadequate teacher training, they do not explore how this affects teachers' ability to assess school readiness effectively. This gap is significant, as teachers' perceptions and capacities are crucial for aligning pedagogical strategies with contextual realities in Zambia.

2.3 Perceptions of teachers on school readiness assessment

Teachers perceive school readiness as a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses various skills and abilities. A study by Smith & Wilson (2021) found that teachers emphasised both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of readiness, including language and literacy skills, social-emotional development, and self-regulation abilities. This holistic perspective reflects a growing understanding that school readiness is not solely based on academic achievements but also on socio-emotional competencies (Smith & Wilson, 2021). These factors are interlinked and influence how teachers approach assessments.

Brown (2019) suggests that teachers' perceptions of school readiness are generally positive. However, there is also evidence that teachers may have different expectations for learners from different backgrounds or with different abilities. For example, Hamre et al, (2018) found that teachers are more likely to perceive girls as being ready for school than boys, or learners from well to do families as being more ready than those from low status families.

Furthermore, the literature highlights that teachers' perceptions of school readiness are influenced by their own experiences and beliefs. A study by Smith et al. (2019) revealed that teachers' personal experiences as parents or caregivers affected their perceptions of readiness. For instance, teachers who had children with learning difficulties were more inclined to believe that readiness was solely determined by academic abilities, while others emphasised the importance of socio-emotional competencies based on their observations as parents. Moreover, the literature suggests that teachers' perceptions of readiness are also shaped by external factors, such as policy guidelines and curriculum expectations. A study conducted by Jones (2018) found that teachers' perceptions

aligned closely with the mandated learning outcomes and standards outlined by their school districts. These findings underscore the influence of external factors on teachers' understanding of readiness and highlight the need for alignment between policy guidelines and teachers' beliefs to ensure effective practices.

In a similar study by Hustedt et al (2017) found that teachers who believe that school readiness is primarily about academic skills were less likely to recognize the importance of social-emotional development. This suggests that that teachers' perceptions of school readiness can be influenced by their personal experiences and beliefs about early childhood education. This also suggests that teachers may approach the assessment of school readiness with varying perspectives, which could affect how they evaluate children entering primary education.

Clark et al. (2019) suggest that understanding each child's starting point allows educators to set achievable goals and milestones, fostering a positive learning environment and boosting children's confidence in their abilities. Studies by Brown and Green (2018) emphasise that assessing readiness can identify children who may require additional support or intervention. Early identification of potential challenges allows for timely intervention strategies to be implemented, mitigating difficulties before they escalate and ensuring a smoother learning journey. The assessment of school readiness informs curriculum planning. Davis and Johnson (2020) suggest that insights gained from readiness assessments enable teachers to adjust curriculum content and pacing, aligning it with the developmental level and interests of the learners.

Contrary, Dorian (2021) critiques school readiness assessments for their narrow focus and reliance on a deficit model, which highlights what children lack rather than recognizing their strengths and interests. This approach pressures educators to prioritise test scores over experiential, child-led learning. Additionally, standardized assessments fail to capture a holistic understanding of development, often focusing solely on literacy and numeracy while neglecting essential attributes like resilience, curiosity, and social skills. The fairness of age-based assessments is also questioned, as they do not account for developmental differences, disadvantaging younger children in a cohort. Furthermore, research suggests that early assessments have a weak correlation with long-term academic success, with the quality of early education playing a more critical role. Dorian also highlights how these assessments often overlook social contexts that influence development,

limiting their reliability. As a result, critics argue that school readiness should be viewed as an ongoing process, advocating for flexible curricula and schools that adapt to diverse needs rather than imposing rigid expectations on children.

Musonda and Matafwali (2023) however, conducted a study that aimed to explore the role of ECE in supporting school readiness and transition by examining the perspectives of preschool and grade one teachers. Their research highlights the limited access to quality early childhood education (ECE) in Zambia, revealing that less than 35% of grade one entrants had prior ECE experience. This situation poses a significant risk of producing a generation of children lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills, which are essential for leading productive and meaningful lives. As part of a broader investigation into how ECE contributes to successful transitions and school preparedness, the study found both similarities and differences in teachers' views. While both preschool and grade one teachers acknowledged the importance of ECE in facilitating school readiness, their perceptions varied regarding the key skills necessary for a smooth transition. These findings underscore the need for a more structured approach to ECE and transition planning to enhance learning outcomes for young children.

2.4 Barriers to school readiness assessment

Smith and Green (2021) observed that conducting school readiness assessments is not without its challenges. One of the prominent challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments is the scarcity of resources, including time, materials, and personnel (Dickinson & Neuman, 2017). ECE teachers face time constraints due to the demands of a dynamic classroom environment. Balancing instructional time with assessment activities is a delicate task (Wahab, 2015). Finding sufficient time to conduct thorough assessments while also providing meaningful instruction can be challenging. Striking a balance between formal, standardised assessments and informal, teacher-generated evaluations is essential for a comprehensive understanding of a child's readiness (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2018). Navigating between these assessment types and interpreting results effectively can be a complex process for ECE teachers. Limited resources hinder their ability to administer comprehensive assessments and provide tailored support for each child.

ECE classrooms often consist of children with varying learning abilities, backgrounds, and developmental trajectories. Adapting assessments to meet the diverse needs of all learners can be a significant challenge (Davis, 2018). Ensuring assessments are inclusive and sensitive to individual differences is essential for accurate evaluations. However, ECE teachers often encounter cultural diversity within their classrooms, which can pose challenges in conducting assessments (LaRue, 2018). Language barriers and differing cultural norms may impact a teacher's ability to accurately interpret and evaluate a child's readiness. Sensitivity to cultural differences is crucial for fair and unbiased assessments. Engaging parents in the assessment process is crucial for a holistic understanding of a child's development. However, challenges in communication, differing expectations, and limited parental involvement can hinder this collaborative effort (Hamre, Downer & Barbarin, 2018). Establishing effective channels of communication is essential for a comprehensive assessment.

According to a study by Lungu (2021), teachers reported that these factors negatively impacted their ability to conduct comprehensive assessments (Lungu, 2021). For example, without enough space for outdoor activities, it was difficult to assess children's physical development properly. Similarly, the shortage of play materials and other learning resources restricted teachers' ability to assess children's learning through diverse activities (Lungu, 2021). The study also found that teachers faced time constraints, with tight schedules leaving little room for in-depth evaluations. Additionally, there was a lack of engagement from parents, which further complicated the assessment process. Teachers indicated that parental involvement is crucial for supporting children's readiness at home, yet many parents were not sufficiently involved (Lungu, 2021).

The literature also identifies significant challenges in assessing school readiness, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Teachers often report overcrowded classrooms, which limit their ability to assess each child individually (Chanda & Bwalya, 2020). This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of materials, such as age-appropriate testing tools, toys, and games that could help in making the assessment process more engaging and accurate (Chanda & Bwalya, 2021). Another critical challenge is the limited professional development opportunities available to teachers. Many ECE teachers in Zambia may not have received adequate training in using advanced assessment tools or interpreting results to inform teaching strategies. This gap in

knowledge can lead to assessments that are either incomplete or ineffective, hindering early intervention efforts that could support children's development (Ngulube & Zulu, 2020).

2.5 Literature gap

While the literature provided valuable insights into the importance of assessing school readiness and its effect on teaching practices, there appears to be a notable research gap in exploring the perceptions of early childhood education teachers in assessing the level of readiness of children entering primary education in Choma district. The existing studies primarily focused on the general significance of school readiness assessment, the various domains of assessment, and the influence of teachers' perceptions on their assessment practices (Brown, 2019), Smith & Wilson (2021) and Davis (2018). However, there was a lack of specific research that delves into the experiences, challenges, and strategies employed by ECE teachers in Choma district when conducting school readiness assessments. Lungu (2022), had a relatively similar study whose purpose was to establish the assessment practices used by teachers in Early Childhood Education Centers, focused specifically on trying to understand how teachers implemented summative and formative assessments.

Given the unique context of Choma district, which may have encompassed diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, resource availability, and educational policies, understanding the experiences of ECE teachers in this specific location became imperative. It was crucial to investigate how local factors and constraints may influence the assessment process and subsequently affect teaching practices. Additionally, evaluating any potential discrepancies between policy guidelines and teachers' actual practices in assessing school readiness in Choma district would provide valuable insights for improving the alignment between policy recommendations and on-the-ground implementation.

Furthermore, considering the evolving nature of educational priorities and expectations for school preparedness, a focused study on the experiences of ECE teachers in Choma district will provide timely and context-specific information. This research gap called for an empirical study that directly engages with ECE teachers to gain a nuanced understanding of their experiences and strategies in assessing school readiness in the specific context of Choma district. Such a study

would contribute valuable insights for enhancing the effectiveness of school readiness assessments and subsequently improving the quality of primary education in the district.

2.6 Chapter summary

The second chapter aimed at reviewing literature related to the topic of study. Literature relating to school readiness assessments from global, regional and country experiences has been reviewed. The section mainly focused on reviewing studies on the historical perspective of school readiness assessment, assessment practices by ECE teachers, perceptions of teachers on school readiness assessment, and finally literature gaps were identified encompassing the knowledge gap on the topic of the study, theoretical and population gaps.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the research design that was employed in this study, the population of the study, target population, study site, sample size as well as sampling techniques. Further, the chapter highlighted the data collection tools and procedures, data analysis and the ethical considerations.

3.1 Approach

To comprehensively investigate how school readiness assessment is conducted by Early Childhood Education teachers in primary schools, this study employed a qualitative research approach. The reason for choosing this method was to have an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perception of the school readiness assessment in ECE centers by engaging the participants through in-depth interviews. Qualitative methods, such as interviews offer rich, context-specific insights into the

experiences and perspectives of teachers, allowing for a deep evaluation of their challenges (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Qualitative research relied on a research strategy that is flexible and interactive, this includes interviewing and focus group discussions (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). One of the benefits of qualitative research was that the use of open-ended questioning and probing enabled participants to react in their own terms (Berg, 2001; Afzal & Azeem, 2008). The interpretivism paradigm, which emphasises obtaining people's subjective and in-depth understanding of the social processes being discussed, was used in the qualitative technique. In keeping with this, study participants were interviewed.

3.2 Research design

In order to delve into the complexities of school readiness assessments, this study adopted a case study research design. This design was ideal for capturing detailed information and identifying patterns within the population, providing a clear picture of the teachers' current practices in school readiness assessment among ECE centers, teachers perceptions as well as the challenges faced. It is versatile, allowing for various data collection methods such interviews and focused-group discussions, which were helpful in building a comprehensive understanding of the current situation. The study focused on ECE teachers in ECE centres within Choma district.

3.3 Study area

This study was conducted in Choma district. The district is the provincial capital for Southern Province in Zambia. The study was conducted at primary schools offering ECE to investigate the teacher perceptions on school readiness assessment practices.

3.4 Target population

The target population of this study were ECE teachers, school managers from selected schools in Choma district. According to the Choma District Education Board Secretary annual report (2023), the district has a total of 86 ECE teachers in 18 zones.

3.5 Sampling technique

The study employed purposive or judgmental sampling technique to select the sample size (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Expert purposive sampling was employed to select ECE teachers. The ECE

teachers were chosen based on factors such as years of experience, educational qualifications, and their role in conducting school readiness assessments. It is important to note that only teachers with ECE qualifications participated in the interviews. Similarly, homogeneous sampling technique was used to select school managers based on their managerial responsibilities and involvement in decision-making processes related to assessments.

3.6 Sample size

Patton (2002) argues that sample sizes in qualitative research should not be too large, as it can become challenging for the researcher to gather detailed and meaningful data. Therefore, the sample size was determined once data saturation was reached, meaning when the information collected aligned with the research goals and questions. In this study, the sample size reached saturation at 20 participants. This was made up of 10 ECE teachers as well as 5 school managers from 5 zones (1 from each zone), as well as 1 FGD (5 per group). Pianta, et al. (2018) points out that a well-determined sample size is essential for drawing meaningful conclusions from the data collected. If the sample size is too small, the results may not be representative of the population, leading to unreliable findings hence this study had such reasonable number of participants.

3.7 Description of the sample

This section presents the description of the sample by gender, distribution of teachers by age, and the distribution of teachers by experience.

3.7.1 Distribution of teachers by gender

This was aimed at finding out the participation of women and men in the ECE departments. This was important because in development activities thirty percent of female representation in the study was adhered to following the United Nations (2000) declaration on Women's representation in an all-important position. The gender for teachers was distributed as follows;

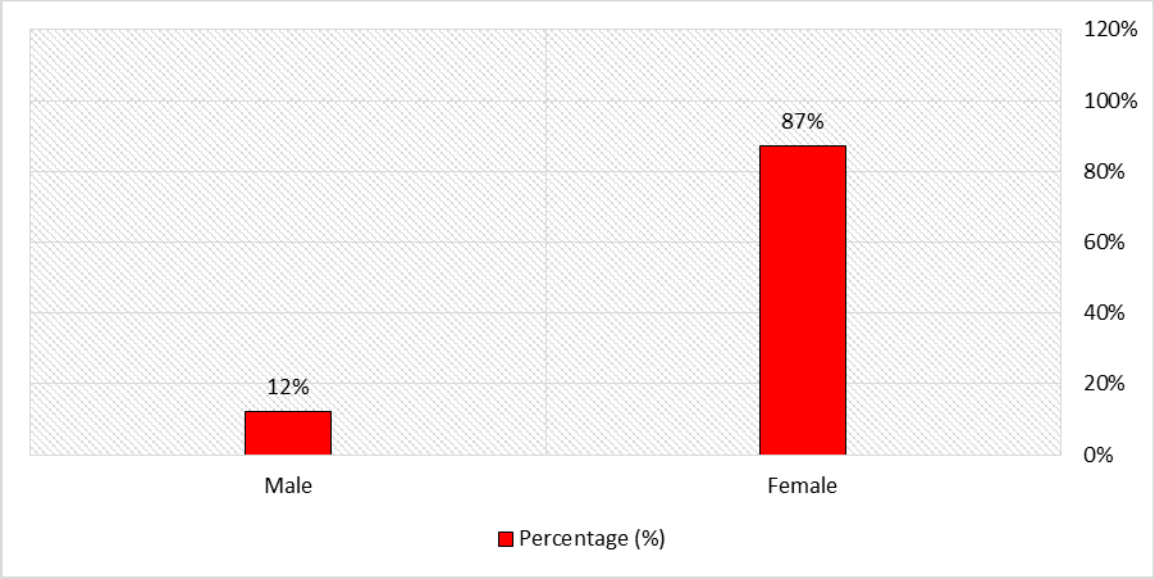

Figure 1: Distribution of teachers by gender

Source: Field work, 2024

The majority of ECE teachers in Choma District primary schools were female, comprising 87.5% of the sample. This indicates a significant gender imbalance in the profession, which may influence the dynamics and approaches to early childhood education in the region.

3.7.2 Distribution of teachers by age

The study sought to find out the age group of the respondents. The examination of the age distribution among teacher respondents illuminates the diverse representation of different age groups within the study's sample, offering valuable insights into the demographic composition of the teaching community involved in this research. The data reveals a varied distribution of participants across multiple age brackets.

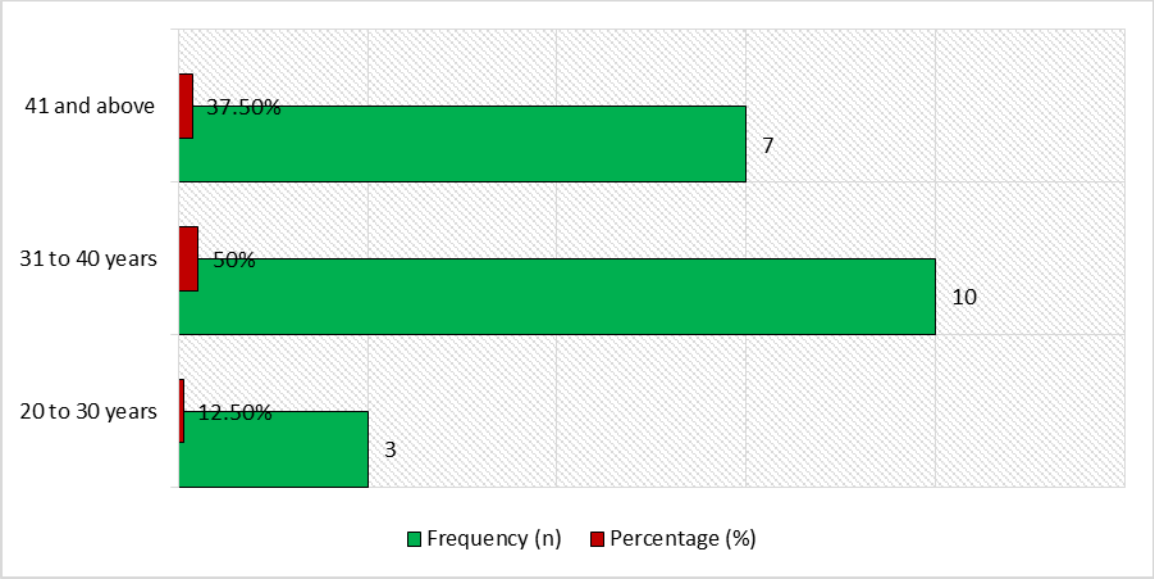

Figure 2: Distribution of teachers by age

Source: Field work, 2024

The largest age group among the ECE teachers was 31 to 40 years, making up 50% of the sample. This suggests that a considerable number of teachers are in their mid-career stage. The 41 and above age group represented 37.5%, indicating a significant presence of experienced teachers, while the 20 to 30 years group comprised 12.5%

3.7.3 Distribution of teachers by experience in early childhood education

The study sought to establish the professional levels of teaching experience for the respondents. Collecting data on teachers' professional experience was crucial because their level of experience directly influences their ability to assess early childhood education learners. Experienced teachers are better equipped to implement policy changes, manage classrooms effectively, and provide insights into how the policy affects learners' outcomes and resources.

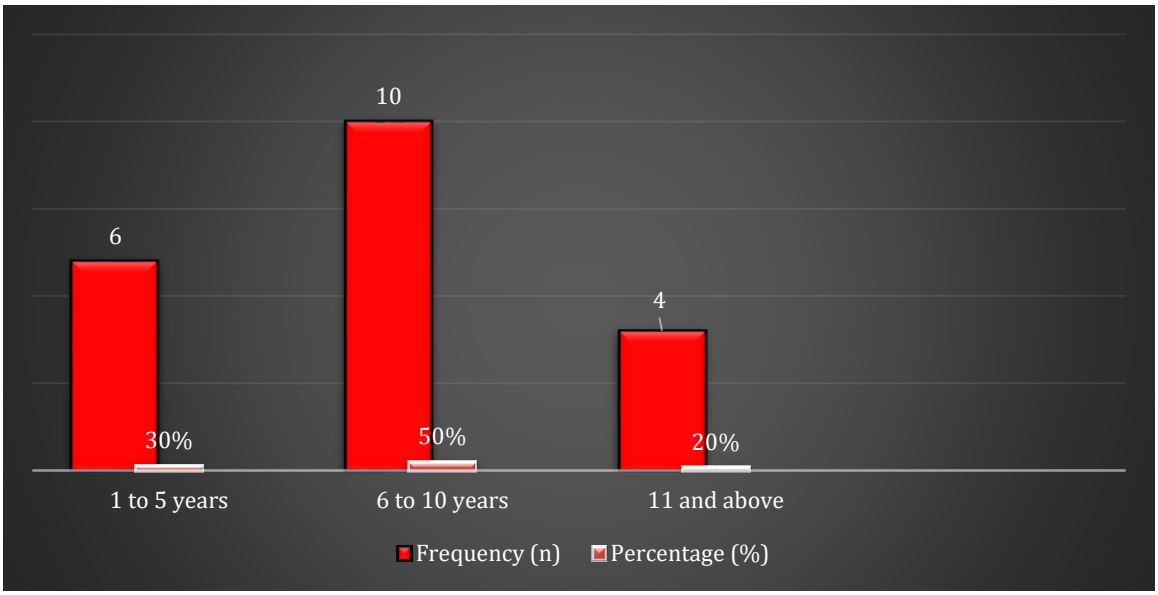

Figure 3: Distribution of teachers by years of experience

Source: Field work, 2024

Half of the ECE teachers had 6 to 10 years of experience, accounting for 50% of the sample. Those with 1 to 5 years of experience made up 30%, indicating a mix of relatively new educators alongside more seasoned ones. Teachers with over 11 years of experience represented 20%, showing a smaller yet significant group of highly experienced educators.

3.8 Data collection methods and instruments

Primary data was collected by the researcher from the ECE teachers and School Managers using interviews and FGDs. It was often tailored specifically to meet the demands or requirements of a particular research project and was considered the best type of data collection method for understanding and solving the research problem at hand (Benedictine University, 2023). Therefore, primary data under this study was information gathered from the participants during the data collection period.

On the other hand, most of the secondary data was sourced from the already existing body of knowledge in academic literature such as reviewed journals, articles, dissertations, government records and other published resources. The secondary data has helped in structuring the background of the study, reviewing the literature under the topic of study and was also helpful in

grounding the discussion of the findings. By its nature, the secondary data was available, affordable, and helped save time and costs.

For data collection in the study on perceptions of ECE teachers on school readiness assessment practices in Choma district, the study used the following research instruments: Semi-Structured Interviews with open-ended questions that evaluate how school readiness assessment was conducted by early childhood education teachers in primary schools in Choma district. Semi-structured interviews were highly suitable for qualitative data for the study as they allowed for a comprehensive exploration on how school readiness assessment was conducted by early childhood education teachers in primary schools in Choma district. According to Patton (2015), this approach encourages participants to express their perspectives in their own words, promoting rich, detailed responses that capture the complexity of the assessment practices.

The study also used Focused Group Discussion (FGD) to generate information on the study objectives. The researcher organized 1 FGD of 5 ECE teachers from 1 zone whose inclusion was determined by saturation of the data. The researcher ensured that every participant in the FGD was given an opportunity to freely raise their point of view. This was essential in ensuring that data collected was triangulated and was credible.

3.9 Data analysis

The researcher used the thematic data analysis method. Utilizing thematic analysis, the interview transcripts were examined to identify key themes, patterns, and insights pertaining to school readiness assessment. Braun and Clarke (2016) highlight that thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used approach that allows for a systematic identification and organization of recurring themes in qualitative data. In the context of this research, thematic analysis offered a rigorous and transparent method for identifying key patterns and insights related to school readiness assessment practices among early childhood education teachers in Choma district. This analysis technique involved the development and use of themes in analysing the generated data. According to Lochmiller (2021), thematic analysis is descriptive, explanatory and critical. In thematic analysis, the focus is on the use of the participant's own written or spoken account. According to Maguire & Delahunt (2017) the six steps the researcher followed to analyse the data includes; familiarity with the data by reading and re-reading; generating the initial codes using both deductive and

inductive approaches; searching for themes from a deductive and inductive point of view; reviewing of the themes; defining the themes; and finally, writing up the findings.

3.10 Trustworthiness

In this study, credibility, dependability, confirmability and authenticity was used to describe what characterizes the aspects of trustworthiness of data (Patton, 1990). While in qualitative studies, researchers do not use instruments with established metrics to determine the validity and reliability, trustworthiness is used to establish it (Bless & Achola 2003).

To enhance credibility, the researcher used triangulation, gathering data from multiple data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This method helped deepen the findings by integrating various data sources, ensuring the results are robust and well-supported. Dependability, according to Newby (2010), pertains to the consistency of findings over time. The researcher ensured that findings were thoroughly analyzed, clearly explained, and supported by data. Additionally, an inquiry audit was used to maintain consistency and avoid redundancy in the data.

The researcher avoided personal biases in interpreting findings and relied solely on participants' perspectives to ensure authenticity. Detailed documentation of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, was maintained through audit trails. These records were available for external review, enabling an objective evaluation of the study. By adhering to these practices, the researcher ensured the research is trustworthy, unbiased, and true to participants' experiences, upholding ethical standards and reinforcing the integrity of the study.

3.11 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in any research study to ensure that the rights and well-being of participants are protected, and the research is conducted in an ethical and responsible manner (David & Resnik, 2024). Ethical research clearance was sought from the university ethics committee (Appendix 5 on the appendices list), an approval from the ministry of education (DEBS) also collected, Informed consent were obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study by the use of a written and signed consent form. The confidentiality of the participants

was ensured by not revealing their identities in the report. The researcher specified how data was to be used and who was going to have access to it.

During the study, the interviewee showed a willingness to participate in the study by reading through the consent form before signing it. The four principles of research ethics which are the right of the individual, beneficence doing good, non-maleficence, not doing harm and justice particularly equity was adhered to. The Principal Investigator ensured that respondents were provided with adequate information on the purpose of the study, its specific objectives and the roles they would play in the study. Participants were then at liberty to either accept or refuse to participate in the study. Those who chose to participate in the study but requested to discontinue during the process, were not coerced to continue, and they were not be required to provide any explanation for deciding to discontinue.

Furthermore, there was strict adherence and maintenance of ethical issues in order to ensure confidentially of responses. In order to promote non-disclosure of information, unique identity number was given to each individual. All Participants had the liberty to either participate in the study or not. Furthermore, none of the respondents' names were mentioned in the study report.

3.12 Chapter summary

This chapter details the methodology and design used in the study on school readiness assessment by early Childhood Education Teachers in Choma district. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, using purposive sampling to select 20 participants, including ECE teachers and school managers. Data collection methods include Semi-structure interviews and focus group discussions, analysed using thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability and confirmability. Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality and adherence to research ethics, were strictly followed to protect participants rights and maintain the study's integrity.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the demographics of the ECE teachers, the research findings and analysis on the study on school readiness assessment practices employed by early childhood education (ECE) teachers in primary schools within Choma District. The qualitative research methods were used in the generation and analysis of data. Interview guides as well as focused-group discussions were used to provide a well-rounded perspective on school readiness assessment practices among ECE teachers in Choma District. A detailed presentation and analysis of the findings is given below:

4.1 Current assessments practices

School readiness assessments are crucial in Early Childhood Education (ECE) for evaluating children's developmental progress and preparing them for primary education. In Choma district, these assessments involve various methods, including screening, observation, and the use of standardized and teacher-made tools, often aligned with curriculum objectives. This theme explores the frequency, methods, and tools used in these assessments, highlighting their role in developmental evaluation and the integration of technology to enhance accuracy and efficiency.

4.1.1 Frequency of school readiness assessments

Participants highlighted varying assessment frequencies, with monthly assessments being the most common. The assessment practices of teachers and school heads revealed a blend of formative and summative approaches, emphasising the importance of understanding the learner before conducting evaluations. Teachers often prioritize getting to know the child over time, integrating both daily observations and periodic assessments to ensure a holistic understanding of the learner's progress. As shared by the participants below;

Participant 2 *"we normally do monthly and yearly. We teach before assessing because we can't just start assessing a child after a week or so without knowing them. You need to assess the child at least after a month and at the end of the year while you have known the child better."*

The frequency and methods of assessments vary among educators, but there's a shared focus on monitoring student progress over time. Teachers acknowledge the practical challenges of daily assessments while emphasising monthly evaluations to capture developmental trends effectively.

Participant 1 FGD shared that *"Normally, I do assess the learners on a daily basis, but for school readiness, I assess monthly. I want to see how the learner is progressing, how they are performing."*

Participant 5 added, *"I do it monthly. It's not easy to do on a daily basis. You need to plan and observe the children nicely before conducting assessments. You need to teach first."*

Head Teachers provided additional insights into assessment practices, combining daily observations with structured monthly and termly assessments. These practices aim to balance immediate feedback with long-term developmental evaluation.

HT 4 shared *"Teachers use observation daily, but monthly assessments include pre-tests such as coloring or tracing within a space. Termly assessments involve sitting with each learner to gauge progress."*

HT 3 *"We use formative assessments in the long run to ascertain if our methods meet the intended objectives. Summative assessments are used at the end of the term and year to measure readiness for the next grade."*

4.1.2 Screening as the foundation of assessment

Screening serves as a critical first step in assessing children's readiness for school and determining appropriate placement. This initial evaluation ensures that educators understand the child's abilities, developmental stage, and needs. Screening is often followed by observation and diagnostic assessments, creating a comprehensive approach to understanding learners at entry.

Participant 1 FGD *"When parents bring their child for enrollment, we first conduct screening to check if the child is ready for school. Screening continues for about a week or two, followed by observation and diagnostic assessments for placement."*

In the same vein, other participants shared similar thoughts as presented below;

Participant 5*"We conduct screening the first day the child reports at school to understand how much they know and for placement purposes."*

Participant 2 FGD *"I do screening during the first two weeks before enrolling the learner."*

Participant 9 *"Screening checks if the child is able to talk or use the toilet. This continues for a week, coupled with observation, to understand the real character of the child."*

Further, Head Teachers emphasise the diagnostic nature of screening, which provides key insights into a child's current knowledge and abilities. According to them this foundational assessment helps educators identify both strengths and challenges, guiding interventions and placement, as narrated;

HT 1 *"We do screening to identify what the child knows, what they can do, and what they struggle with."*

HT 3 *"Screening assessments are done at the point of entry, whether for new or transferred learners. The information is used for placement."*

4.1.3 Observation as a core assessment method

Observation emerges as a cornerstone of Early Childhood Education (ECE) assessment, offering a dynamic and non-intrusive way to understand children's development. This method allows educators to gather insights into a child's physical, cognitive, and social abilities by carefully observing their behavior, interactions, and responses within natural settings. Unlike formal tests, observation captures real-time behaviors, providing a more authentic picture of a child's progress and readiness for learning.

"We continue using observation as a way of assessing school readiness. As learners interact with their environment, I observe and record what I see," Participant 1 shared.

Participant 3 FGD *"We observe the child while they are not aware of what is happening to get their real character."*

HT 1 *"We use observation assessments throughout their entire stay in ECE. We don't test them through writing; we observe them. For example, one day I saw the teacher using the observation method. She asked learners to sing a gospel song and recorded observations."*

Participant 5 *"I use observation to assess physical development, like observing motor skills during play at the park."*

4.1.4 Use of standardised and teacher-made tools

A combination of standardised tools and teacher-created instruments is widely used in Early Childhood Education (ECE) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of children's developmental progress. These tools cater to multiple developmental domains and allow teachers to adapt assessments to the needs of individual learners, as unveiled by different participants saying;

Participant 7 *"We use two tools CDATZ and ICLAP, alongside observation."*

Participant 3 FGD *"ICLAP requires teachers to record observations from the first day a learner reports to school and continue observing."*

Participant 4 FGD *"I use ICLAP for physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development, as it covers all developmental domains. I also use portfolios."*

The participant emphasises ICLAP's versatility in covering various developmental domains. The use of portfolios complements this by offering tangible evidence of a child's growth, fostering a more holistic approach to assessment.

Participant 5 shared *"We use standardised assessments in tablets provided by ZOCS."*

Participant 7 *"For social-emotional development, I use ICLAP, a social interaction sheet, and a self-made tool."*

In the same vein Participant 5 FGD shared; *"I use a teacher-made social interaction tool for social development assessments."*

4.1.5 Alignment of methods with curriculum objectives

Participants stressed the importance of aligning assessment methods with curriculum objectives. This alignment ensures that assessment practices contribute to a holistic understanding of a child's growth and readiness for the next stages of learning. Tools and strategies are structured to encompass the core developmental domains, including cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual growth, in line with curriculum standards.

Participant 3 *"ICLAP covers all developmental domains, including activities for language, literacy, and physical development."*

Participant 1 FGD *"The tools align well, as the child develops cognitively, spiritually, emotionally, and socially."*

The participants highlighted the versatility of the ICLAP tool in addressing the comprehensive developmental goals of the curriculum. By integrating activities that cater to literacy, physical growth, and language skills, ICLAP ensures a well-rounded evaluation of children's progress. The participant emphasises the holistic nature of the assessment tools, which align with the curriculum's objectives to foster all aspects of a child's growth. This approach ensures that education in early childhood settings nurtures the whole child.

Participant 7 *"Practices help children develop holistically—socially, cognitively, emotionally, physically, and spiritually."*

HT 3 *"These tools align successfully, as early childhood is the stage to master basics like speaking, writing, and forming simple words."*

HT 5 *"Tools like deck cards prepare children for grade 1, aligning with objectives in literacy, math, and social-emotional development."*

4.1.6 Specific methods for developmental domains

Participants shared specific methods tailored to assessing individual developmental domains, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of early childhood education assessment. These methods ensure targeted evaluations in physical, social-emotional, and language and literacy development.

4.1.6.1 Motor skills and physical development

Participant 5 *"I use a motor skills checklist to observe and record children's activities during play."*

Participant 4 FGD *"We assess physical development by observing activities like running, jumping, and scribbling."*

Participant 4 *"ICLAP includes activities for fine and gross motor development, recorded during play."*

The participants emphasised the use of structured tools, such as checklists, to evaluate children's physical abilities. Play-based observation allows educators to assess key motor skills, including coordination and balance, in an engaging and natural context. This indicates the role of active observation in physical development assessments. Activities like running and jumping reveal gross motor skills, while scribbling offers insights into fine motor abilities. This statement highlights the integration of motor skills assessment into the ICLAP tool, ensuring that physical development is evaluated systematically alongside other domains.

4.1.6.2 Social-emotional development

Another key aspect is the Social-Emotional Development. In an interview, the participants shared various views on the tools they use, as explained below;

Participant 8 *"I interact with children and observe them as they interact with others, recording in the ICLAP tool."*

Participant 7 *"I use ICLAP, a social interaction sheet, and my own teacher-made tool to assess social-emotional development."*

This response emphasises the role of interaction and observation in assessing social-emotional development.

4.1.6.3 Language and literacy development

Language and Literacy Development was another tool found. This response highlights the use of interactive methods to assess language and literacy. Activities such as picture description foster verbal expression, comprehension, and creative thinking. This statement demonstrates the variety of methods employed to evaluate literacy skills. Techniques like story retelling and letter recognition promote early reading abilities and comprehension.

Participant 2 *"I use picture stories and ask learners to describe or connect elements in the pictures."*

Participant 5 FGD *"I use picture reading, retelling stories, and letter recognition to assess literacy. I also use games involving sounds and syllables, assessing with ICLAP."*

HT 3 *"Children learn to manipulate letters, form words, and speak or write, meeting curriculum objectives."*

4.1.7 Integration of technology in assessments

The integration of technology into ECE assessments provides educators with innovative tools to streamline the evaluation process. Tablets and other digital devices are used to conduct standardised assessments efficiently, enhancing both accuracy and consistency.

Participant 5 *"We use tablets provided by ZOCS to conduct assessments."*

HT 2 *"We are privileged to have tablets provided by ZOCS for assessments."*

4.2 Teacher perceptions

This section examines how the ECE reached perceived school readiness assessment in ECE centers. As such the section unveils findings on academic readiness and skill development, social and emotional development for school transition, instructional improvement and adaptation, and targeted support and learner progress monitoring.

4.2.1. Academic readiness and skill development

Assessments play a critical role in preparing Early Childhood Education (ECE) learners for Grade One, as they help teachers evaluate the developmental and academic readiness of children. These assessments not only measure progress but also guide educators in tailoring their teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Participant 1 *"As for me they are very effective, because when for example by the class I was teaching last year, I think 90% of them went to grade 1 and are able to write and read. So I think it's very effective."*

Participant 7 *"It's very effective in the sense that, my goal is that by the time a child is leaving my class, they should be able to sound out some letters, they should be able to read the syllables, they should be able to ready simple words. They should be able to write also their own names. They*

should be able to copy what they see on the board. Therefore, I see these assessments to very important because we prepare the learners for the next grade."

4.2.2 Social and emotional development for school transition

The study also found that school readiness assessment has been effective towards promoting social and emotional development of children for school transition, as shared by teachers;

Participant 2 *"Very effective, because the children are well prepared. They learn how to write to interact with friends, we also prepare them to get ready for serious learning moving them away from play activities. So, it's very effective. The learners develop holistically also, physically, emotionally, socially and so on and so forth."*

Participant 3 FGD *"I would also give another example, look at a child who comes to school for the first time, as time goes on and this child is slowly learning how to interact with fellow learners, and starts to love school. They finally stop this system of crying because they are now used to being in school. So by the time this child goes to grade one (1), they would have stopped crying and became anxious to be in grade 1."*

4.2.3 Instructional improvement and adaptation

The teachers were also asked to share on the impact of school readiness assessment on their ability to improve their teaching methods;

Participant 2 FGD *"they significantly impact my teaching positively because they help me, for example, they help me improve in areas I did not do well. For example, if I did not teach well in Language and Literacy, I would go back and check myself and redo the lesson and probably change the teaching method if it is not working well with the learners. For example, if I was using teacher centered I would change to learner centered."*

This highlights the broader impact of assessments on shaping a holistic and effective teaching practice, as revealed;

Participant 9 *"I believe it is a good practice for preparing the learners. As a teacher am able to tell if the strategy am using is working well or not. For instance, when am teaching pre-*

mathematics and am using a certain methodology and when I realize that it is not working well I will change to something that will help the learners."

The participant emphasised the importance of assessments in guiding instructional improvements.

Participant 4 *"It gives me the desire to do more especially when I see that the learners are progressing well. So, it significantly impacts my teaching. For example, if I see that some learner ate sill have challenges in one of the learning areas, I will group them accordingly and give them activities that I feel can help them."*

4.2.4 Targeted support and learner progress monitoring

The teachers expressed how assessments not only inspire motivation but also guide the teacher to address challenges in student learning. When progress is evident, the teacher feels encouraged to do more, while areas where students are struggling prompt targeted interventions. By grouping learners based on their needs and providing tailored activities, assessments help the teacher ensure that no child is left behind. This highlights the role of assessments in shaping a responsive and dynamic teaching approach, focused on individualized support for learners. Participants said;

Participant 6 *"It impacts my teaching in the sense that by the time the learners are about to the next grade, I will be able to say I have given the next grade teacher learners who are able to do this and that. Definitely there will be no doubt even when they are handled over to the next grade teacher, I will be able to say, these learners are able to read out sounds, are able to use the toilets without problems, are able to interact and do this and that."*

Participant FGD 2 *"they positively impact my teaching. For example, even when it comes to writing am happy to send learners who able to write and read, have good eye-hand-coordination, have good handwriting because they have learned how to hold a pencil and sit properly."*

4.3 Challenges faced by teachers

This section addresses the third objective of the study, which focused on identifying the challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments including children's varying moods and preferences, limited learning space, language barriers with transferred students, and insufficient time due to high enrollment.

4.4.1 Children's varying moods

Teachers noted that children's emotional states and moods greatly impact their participation in school readiness activities and assessments. The varying moods of children on a given day can make it difficult to engage every child effectively, leading to inconsistent assessments. As narrated by the participants;

Participant 3 FGD *"Sometimes children come with different moods at school. You can give a child to do this activity, the child would not want. Maybe you give that child another activity to do would want to do something else. Others would not want to mingle with friends and so on. And also not having enough learning space is a challenge because we cannot do some of the activities from inside classroom."*

Participant 4 FGD *"The children are too many to be accommodated in a small classroom. Sometimes its language barrier especially if a child came on transfer from another province. And because the children are many so time because another factor that contribute to the challenges when conducting school readiness assessment."*

The varying moods of children present a significant challenge in assessing school readiness. Teachers struggle to maintain engagement with children who may be unwilling to participate or socialize, affecting the consistency and effectiveness of assessments. Emotional states such as reluctance to engage, isolation from peers, or mood changes on different days complicate the process. Furthermore, other external factors like overcrowded classrooms and language barriers exacerbate the challenge, as children may not fully engage or perform as expected due to environmental stressors.

4.3.2 Over-enrollment and absenteeism

Over-enrollment and absenteeism were identified as major barriers to consistent and comprehensive school readiness assessments. With large numbers of students in a classroom and fluctuating attendance, teachers are unable to assess all learners uniformly or at the same time, impacting the quality and accuracy of the assessments. The further shared that;

Participant 4 *"Over enrollment is of the challenges, the learners are many in the classroom against one teacher. Not having enough teachers and space to accommodate the learners. The other*

challenge is absenteeism. Today you teach this group, tomorrow you will have totally a different group all together. So this because a challenge when it comes to conducting assessment for school readiness."

4.3.3 Time constraints

Time constraints were another key challenge identified in the study. Teachers struggled to find enough time to conduct thorough school readiness assessments due to competing demands and lack of parental engagement.

Participant 5 indicated that *"The first challenges is Time, is not enough when it comes to conducting school readiness assessments. Also, the parents, when it comes to engage parents, they don't show up. I have difficulties with parents."*

4.3.4 Inadequate teaching materials and limited classroom space

Inadequate teaching materials, cramped classroom space, and over-enrollment further hinder teachers' ability to effectively conduct school readiness assessments. Limited resources make it difficult to provide an engaging and enriching environment for young learners, and overcrowded classrooms restrict opportunities for individual assessments.

In this vein Participant 1 FGD *"As you know madam, this is a combined school. So, the first challenge that I face is teachers' attitude, they don't understand what is involved in ECE. Secondly, I don't always have enough teaching and learning material to help me conduct school readiness assessments effectively. Materials like toys, enough crayons, learners' text books etc."*

In addition, Participant 3 FGD added *"The other challenge is that we don't have a spacious classroom. As you can see this classroom we are currently using was used as an office. It's very small so the learners cannot write properly. The other challenge is over enrollment. As you know that the government has pronounced free education, and we have to enroll every child who comes to a place."*

These environmental challenges restrict the scope of assessments and prevent teachers from utilizing a diverse range of strategies for evaluating school readiness, as explained by the participant;

Participant 9 *"It is difficult to assess every learner on time. It takes time to conduct. When it comes to outdoor activities, it's a challenge because we don't have a play park and the space outside the classroom is small."*

4.3.5 The effect of challenges on teaching practice

The interviews with teachers in Choma District revealed various challenges that significantly impact Early Childhood Education (ECE) teaching practices. These challenges include difficulties in achieving planned learning outcomes, limited time for instruction and activities, and external factors affecting student attendance. The following analysis provides a deeper understanding of how these challenges hinder teaching effectiveness.

A common issue among teachers is the discrepancy between planned activities and actual implementation. Factors such as limited space and time constraints prevent teachers from conducting planned outdoor activities, forcing them to teach within overcrowded classrooms. These environmental limitations make it difficult to achieve learning objectives, which in turn affects the overall effectiveness of teaching, as revealed by the participants;

Participant 2 *"I always want to achieve my goals as planned, but it is not like that because of these challenges. When I plan my daily activities with the learners, let's say outdoor activities, it does not happen as I have planned. So, we end up using the classroom which has limited space. This somehow makes my teaching ineffective."*

Participant 5 FGD *"Honestly, this affects my teaching. I don't have the opportunity to move on because the syllabus says that I have to teach a certain sound in week 4. I have to make sure that each child has learned, but I find that I don't complete the planned activities. I have to reschedule every time. Also, it's very difficult to observe each and every learner as planned. It takes time to finish observing all the learners."*

Both participants highlight how limited space and time force teachers to adapt their planned activities, often resulting in incomplete lessons and ineffective teaching.

Time management emerged as a significant challenge, especially for teachers handling multiple classes. The short class periods make it difficult to cover all planned subjects comprehensively, often forcing teachers to choose between activities and limit the scope of their lessons as shared;

Participant 1 *"With limited time, for example, I have a baby class and a reception class, and these come at different times. Each class is 3 hours. In my reception class, for example, I have many activities to do or teach, but the period is only 30 or 40 minutes. You need to teach, for example, two subjects, but you only end up teaching one. I will give an example if you are teaching sorting, you need children to participate, but you can't just give an example, so you call them one by one, and that takes a lot of time. It is not possible to do other activities planned for that day, so I fail to complete the daily activities."*

4.3.6 External factors affecting student attendance

External factors such as parental engagement and community challenges also play a significant role in the effectiveness of teaching. Teachers often face difficulties in ensuring regular student attendance, which further complicates the assessment of school readiness and overall student progress, as narrated by Participant 5

"It will affect my teaching, like when I tell parents to send the learners to school, they will send them to their gardens. For example, at the school where I teach, there are times when the learners are sent to their gardens to take care of the crops so that the cows won't eat the vegetables. And this negatively affects my teaching."

This participant emphasises how external community responsibilities, such as farming duties, can disrupt students' attendance, leading to inconsistent learning.

4.3.7 Improving the physical learning environment

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the need for improvements to the physical learning environment in ECE classrooms. The teachers emphasised the importance of having adequate space, appropriate learning materials, and physical infrastructure that promotes effective learning and engagement. The suggestions provided by the teachers aim to create an environment that supports not only teaching and assessment but also the overall development of the children.

In this vein, Participant 3 unveiled *"I feel the strategies that we can implement are the learning corners because the child will be able to choose what they want to do. For example, a home corner, science corner, or language and literacy corner. So, a child will choose what they want to do,*

which can only be implemented if we have enough teaching and learning materials and spacious classrooms. And also, if we can have a play park, it can help so much."

This participant highlights the importance of creating learning corners within the classroom to provide children with choices and autonomy over their learning. However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on having sufficient materials and space. The suggestion for a play park aligns with the need for outdoor spaces that facilitate active learning and physical play, which are critical in early childhood development.

Participant 4 *also shared; "Having two teachers per class can be helpful because each learner will be attended to. If they can train the teachers more on the assessment tools, because some teachers lack that knowledge. Also, if they can provide a standalone classroom that is spacious, it would be good because most government schools have annexed classrooms, which some share with Grade 1. Even the use of visual learning can be a good strategy because learners will concentrate more. Also, the learning areas should be well stocked to make learning more interesting as we are preparing the learners for primary school."*

This participant emphasises the importance of teacher training on assessment tools and suggests that reducing the student-to-teacher ratio by having two teachers per class could improve learning outcomes. The participant also highlights the importance of visual learning aids and well-stocked learning areas to maintain learners' focus and engagement.

Further, Participant 2 FGD narrated; *"I feel if only we can complete constructing the play park because I have seen an increase in the attendance of the learners. I also feel that the number of learners in one class is too much, so if we can have fewer learners, maybe 20 to 25, it will be easier to conduct assessments. If we can also increase the learning hours from 3 hours to 6 or 7 hours, so that the children can have enough time to learn and play, we also need a TV for the learners to watch certain lessons."*

This participant stresses the importance of completing the construction of a play park to improve learner attendance, as outdoor play is essential for young children's development. They also suggest reducing the class size to 20-25 learners to ensure more personalized attention, which would enhance the effectiveness of assessments.

4.4 Chapter summary

Chapter four detailed the exploration of school readiness practices by early childhood education (ECE) teachers in primary schools within Choma District. It established the current practices used by ECE teachers, delved into their experiences with these assessments, and identified the challenges they faced. Additionally, the chapter discussed potential strategies to improve the effectiveness of school readiness assessments based on the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the discussion of the research findings derived from the previous chapter, which provided the analysis of data collected from ECE teachers in Choma District. The current assessment practices, the teacher perceptions challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments. By reflecting on the findings, this chapter also aims to offer insights into possible strategies that can improve school readiness practices in the district.

5.1 Current assessment practices

This section presents the frequency of school readiness assessment, observation as a core assessment method, use of standardised and teacher made tools, methods for developmental domains, integration of technology in assessments as sub headings under Current Assessment Practices.

5.1.1 Frequency of school readiness assessments

The finding that most teachers in Choma District conduct school readiness assessments monthly and at the end of the year shows that teachers recognise the importance of regularly monitoring children's development. Monthly assessments provide teachers with a more continuous understanding of each child's progress, allowing them to identify any issues early and offer timely interventions. This is consistent with the recommendations of Brown et al. (2020), who emphasised that regular assessments are crucial for identifying and addressing developmental delays in young children. However, the teachers who conduct assessments annually may face challenges such as limited resources, high student-to-teacher ratios, or time constraints. Further, Roberts & Smith, (2022) also post that annual assessments may not offer the same depth of insight into a child's readiness for school as more frequent evaluations.

5.1.2 Observation as a core assessment method

The reliance on observations as the primary method of assessment indicates that many teachers in Choma prefer a hands-on, natural approach to understanding children's readiness for school. Observations allow teachers to watch how children interact, play, and engage in tasks, giving them

a clearer picture of social and emotional readiness. Roberts and Smith (2022) supports this, showing that observational methods capture a broader range of behaviors and are particularly useful in early childhood settings. In Choma District, where access to advanced assessment tools may be limited, observations are likely the most accessible and practical method for teachers.

5.1.3 Use of standardised and teacher made tools

On the other hand, the use of standardised tests by teachers shows that some teachers in Choma District still rely on more structured methods to evaluate readiness. This is in line with the findings by (Lee et al., 2021), who stated that while standardised tests can provide measurable data, they may not fully reflect a child's overall development, especially in early childhood. In Choma, where children may come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, relying solely on standardised tests could overlook important aspects of a child's learning potential, such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are not easily measured by standardised formats. The absence of checklists as an assessment tool is notable. Checklists can help teachers systematically track children's developmental milestones in areas such as motor skills, language, and cognitive abilities. This is in support with Johnson and Clark (2023) highlighted the usefulness of checklists in providing structured yet flexible ways for teachers to assess school readiness. The lack of checklist use in Choma District may be due to a lack of access to proper training or materials. Introducing simple, teacher-friendly checklists could improve the effectiveness of assessments in the district.

These findings show that while teachers in Choma District are making efforts to assess school readiness, there are gaps in the methods used. More frequent assessments and the use of diverse tools such as checklists and parental input could provide a more comprehensive understanding of a child's readiness for school. Strengthening teacher training on assessment tools and increasing collaboration with parents may improve the overall quality of school readiness assessments in the district.

5.1.4 Methods for developmental domains

The study found that the most commonly used tool for assessing physical development in school readiness among ECE teachers in Choma District is the motor skills checklist, coordination

observation while others combine coordination observation with tools such as ICLAP and CDATZ. Additionally, other teachers use a combination of the motor skills checklist and coordination observation. No teachers reported using health status assessments.

The use of the motor skills checklist by ECE teachers in Choma District indicates that many teachers prioritize tracking motor skill development in children as part of assessing school readiness. The findings by James & Ndlovu, (2021) has supported the use of motor skills checklists in early childhood education, highlighting their effectiveness in identifying developmental delays early. This tool allows teachers in the district to systematically evaluate a child's ability to perform tasks like running, jumping, and using fine motor skills, such as holding a pencil. In the context of Choma District, this checklist provides an accessible and structured way for teachers to ensure children are developing the physical skills necessary for school. Coordination observation, focuses on observing children's ability to coordinate their movements, which is essential for activities such as writing, playing, and participating in group tasks. This finding is supported by Brown & Cheng, (2020) who indicated that coordination is an important aspect of school readiness, as it affects how children engage with learning materials and interact with their peers. In Choma District, where teachers may need to assess children in large groups, observation provides a practical and flexible method to monitor coordination.

The combined use of the motor skills checklist and coordination observation suggests that some teachers in Choma District recognize the value of a multi-method approach. Using both tools together offers a more comprehensive assessment, capturing both structured motor skill evaluation and observational insights. This is in support with Martins and Silva (2022) who highlighted that combining multiple assessment methods in early childhood education leads to more accurate and holistic evaluations of children's readiness for school. In Choma District, where teachers are dealing with diverse groups of children, such a combination helps ensure that no aspect of physical development is overlooked. Interestingly, no teachers reported using health status assessments as a tool for evaluating physical development. Contrary to this finding, Ngwenya & Patel, (2020) who suggested that health assessments are important for identifying physical conditions that might affect school readiness, such as vision or hearing impairments This absence could be due to a lack of access to health professionals or resources in Choma District. The lack of health assessments in

Choma suggests a gap in the current school readiness evaluation process, as teachers may not be able to identify underlying health issues that could affect children's performance in school.

This highlight that while ECE teachers in Choma District are utilizing effective tools like the motor skills checklist and coordination observation, there are areas for improvement. Introducing health status assessments could help teachers identify health-related barriers to school readiness. Additionally, providing more training and resources for teachers to combine various assessment tools might enhance the accuracy and comprehensiveness of school readiness evaluations in the district.

The dominance of social interaction observations in assessing social and emotional development reflects a practical approach among ECE teachers in Choma District. Observing how children interact with peers and teachers allows educators to assess key social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. This method is particularly useful in early childhood settings where play and peer interaction are essential components of learning. Martins and Silva (2021), agreed to this finding which states that social interaction observations provide real-time insights into children's emotional regulation and social behaviors, making them highly effective in early childhood education. They further support the use of observation as an effective way to gauge children's social readiness for school. In Choma District, where teachers have limited access to advanced tools, observations offer an accessible and practical method for assessing social readiness.

5.1.5 Integration of technology in assessments

The use of other tools, such as ZOCS Tablets and ICLAP, show that some teachers in Choma are incorporating technology into their assessments. This finding is in line with Roberts and Smith (2022), who stipulated that incorporating technology in early childhood assessments improves the accuracy and efficiency of evaluations, especially in resource-constrained settings. These tools offer more standardised ways to measure social and emotional development, providing structured data that can complement observational methods. In Choma, however, the use of such tools is still limited, and expanding access to technological resources could enhance the overall assessment process. The findings show that while social interaction observations are commonly used and practical, there is room for improvement in the variety of tools employed by teachers in Choma

District. Expanding the use of self-regulation checklists and introducing empathy scales could provide a more comprehensive assessment of children's social and emotional readiness for school. Additionally, increasing access to technology-based tools may help streamline and improve the accuracy of assessments.

The use of structured tools like ICLAP and ZOCS tablets reflects a blend of traditional and technological approaches in language assessment. Teachers, such as Participant 5, reported using the ZOCS tablet for activities like alphabet sound recognition and story retelling, which enhance children's phonemic awareness. The study established that ICLAP's structured activities, such as rhymes and syllable games, provide a systematic framework for evaluating language skills. This finding was in line with Roberts and Johnson (2022) who noted that, the integration of technology in assessments is to improve the accuracy and engagement of language assessments in early childhood education. In Choma District, this combination of traditional methods and technological tools helps teachers conduct more comprehensive assessments.

Moreover, ICLAP was identified by Participant 9 as the most effective tool for assessing language and literacy skills, as it provides clear indicators for each child to attain. This preference for ICLAP aligns with research by James and Ndlovu (2021), which found that structured assessment tools like ICLAP offer detailed indicators, making them highly effective for evaluating language proficiency in young children. The specific and clear objectives outlined in ICLAP ensure that teachers can track children's progress in key language areas, such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and storytelling abilities. The use of a combination of observation, interactive activities, and structured tools like ICLAP in Choma District supports a comprehensive approach to assessing cognitive development in language and literacy. This method allows teachers to assess multiple aspects of language skills in different contexts. However, expanding the use of technological tools like ZOCS tablets could further improve the assessment process by making it more engaging and standardised. Additionally, providing more training to teachers on using structured tools like ICLAP could enhance their ability to assess language proficiency more effectively.

The findings revealed that teachers in Choma District employ a mix of formative and summative assessment methods, such as monthly assessments, daily observations, and screening. These

practices align with Social Constructivism theory, which emphasises the importance of continuous interaction and understanding of learners in their social contexts. For instance, teachers' preference for daily observations reflects Vygotsky's principle that learning occurs through active engagement and social interaction (Western Governors University, 2005). By observing learners interact with their environment and peers, teachers construct an authentic understanding of children's developmental progress, which aligns with Vygotsky's belief that knowledge is socially co-constructed. However, the preference for monthly assessments demonstrates a tension with the theory's focus on ongoing, dynamic feedback, as the practical challenges of time and class sizes limit frequent, real-time interaction (Thinkific, 2024).

The use of screening as a foundation of assessment supports the theory's emphasis on scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Western Governors University, 2005). Teachers use screening to establish a baseline and tailor their teaching strategies to meet children at their developmental levels, which is central to social constructivism. However, the findings also expose challenges, such as over-enrollment and limited time, which hinder the ability to conduct thorough, continuous assessments. These constraints contradict the theory's emphasis on personalized scaffolding and the importance of teacher-student interaction in fostering learning within the ZPD (Thinkfic, 2024). Therefore, while the current practices align with the principles of social constructivism, logistical challenges undermine the full realization of its ideals.

5.2 Teacher perceptions

5.2.1 Academic readiness and skill development

The findings show that all ECE teachers in Choma District view their school readiness assessments as effective or very effective. Teachers' positive perceptions suggest that the tools and practices in place meet their expectations in identifying children's readiness for school. These results are consistent with previous research. These findings are in line with Kordich and Hughes (2020), who stated that when teachers believe in the effectiveness of their assessments, they are more likely to use them consistently and accurately. In Choma District, teachers reported using various methods, such as observational techniques, ICLAP tools, and interactive activities, which they find useful in evaluating different aspects of school readiness. This aligns with findings by Bennett et al.

(2021), who showed that teachers who use structured and interactive assessment tools experience better outcomes in early childhood education.

Roberts and Johnson (2022) found that tools with specific and measurable indicators help teachers make more informed decisions about a child's school readiness. The findings from Choma District also highlight that interactive activities like storytelling, games, and picture-based assessments are seen as highly effective in assessing children's language and cognitive skills. Teachers' reliance on these methods shows that they value both traditional observation techniques and modern technological tools. This approach has been proven effective by findings by Zhang and Whitebread (2021), who demonstrated that combining observational techniques with interactive activities helps assess school readiness in a more natural and engaging manner.

In Choma District, teachers' ability to shift from traditional to more interactive teaching methods, based on assessment results, supports their effectiveness in fostering student development. For example, one teacher described moving from a teacher-centered approach to using songs and games, which is consistent with the research indicating that varied teaching strategies can enhance child' learning, as supported by Smith & Brown, (2022) who highlighted the significance of using songs and games when teaching.

5.2.2 Social and emotional development for school transition

Teachers perceive assessments as highly effective in preparing learners for Grade One, particularly in fostering foundational academic skills like literacy and numeracy, as well as social and emotional readiness. These perceptions align with Social Constructivism, which emphasises holistic development and the active construction of knowledge through interaction (Saleem et al, 2022). Teachers' focus on social and emotional development, such as overcoming separation anxiety and fostering peer interactions, resonates with Vygotsky's notion that learning is inherently social. By observing and engaging learners in collaborative activities, teachers facilitate development in both academic and socio-emotional domains, supporting the theory's view that social contexts shape learning outcomes (The Open University, n.d.).

However, while teachers value assessments for informing teaching strategies, their reliance on summative methods contradicts the constructivist focus on continuous, formative evaluation

through social interaction (Thinkific, 2024). Teachers' emphasis on outcomes, such as ensuring learners are ready to read and write, highlights a structured, product-focused approach. This contradicts the theory's principle that learning is an ongoing process shaped by dynamic interactions. Thus, while teachers' perceptions align with the theory's emphasis on holistic development, practical challenges restrict the implementation of continuous, socially-mediated assessments.

5.2.3 Instructional improvement and adaptation

The moderate to significant effect reported by teachers also aligns with findings by Evans et al. (2021), who observed that assessments help educators adjust their instructional approaches to better support student development. For example, observational assessments and tools like ICLAP provide detailed feedback on students' cognitive and social development, allowing teachers to refine their teaching practices accordingly. This feedback loop helps teachers create more effective learning environments tailored to individual student needs. Furthermore, the absence of reports indicating a slight or no effect highlights the strong connection between assessment results and teaching practices. This is in line with Campbell and Riddle (2022), who noted that when teachers see direct benefits from assessments, such as improved student outcomes and more effective instructional strategies, they are more likely to integrate assessment results into their teaching practices. The positive experiences reported by teachers in Choma District support this view, showing that they value the role of assessments in guiding and improving their teaching methods.

These findings show that continuing to use and refine school readiness assessments is beneficial for enhancing teaching practices in Choma District. By maintaining and improving the assessment methods, teachers can ensure that their instructional strategies remain effective and responsive to students' needs. Ongoing professional development and support for using assessment data can further strengthen the impact of these tools on teaching practices. Furthermore, the study's results are consistent with the work of Davis and Wilson (2020), who found that teachers who use assessment data to create remedial activities and adjust their instructional methods are more successful in addressing learning gaps. In Choma District, teachers who reported creating additional activities for students struggling with specific skills illustrate this approach. Their ability

to identify which learners need more support and to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly underscores the importance of assessments in guiding effective instruction.

5.2.4 Targeted support and learner progress monitoring

These findings show that school readiness assessments in Choma District are perceived as having influence on teaching practices. This study therefore, suggests that assessments play a crucial role in shaping how teachers plan and deliver their instruction. Teachers' experiences reflect that these assessments help them tailor their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of their learners. These findings are consistent with research by Perkins and Rosser (2020), who found that assessments can significantly impact teaching practices by providing teachers with valuable insights into students' learning needs. In Choma District, the use of various assessment tools like observations, ICLAP, and interactive activities likely contributes to this influence. Teachers use these assessments to adapt their teaching methods and address specific areas where learners may need additional support.

5.3 Challenges faced by teachers

The study identified several significant challenges that ECE teachers in Choma District face when conducting school readiness assessments. These include varying moods and preferences of children, limited learning space, language barriers, over-enrollment, absenteeism, time constraints, and lack of parental engagement. Teachers also struggle with inadequate teaching materials and insufficient space for outdoor activities, which further complicates the assessment process.

5.3.1 Children's varying moods

The challenges faced by ECE teachers in Choma District are multifaceted and impact the effectiveness of school readiness assessments. Variability in children's moods and preferences, combined with over-enrollment and insufficient learning space, creates a challenging environment for conducting thorough and consistent assessments. This finding is in line with Mwewa (2022), who stated that high leaner-to-teacher ratios and inadequate classroom space can hinder effective teaching and assessment. The findings echoed the current study's results. Language barriers, particularly with students transferring from different regions, and absenteeism complicate the assessment process further. The findings by Phiri and Banda (2021) highlighted that language

barriers and irregular attendance can affect the reliability of assessments, as it becomes difficult to evaluate each child's development consistently. The study's findings align with this study, showing that these issues disrupt the continuity and effectiveness of school readiness evaluations.

5.3.2 Time constraints

Time constraints and lack of parental engagement are additional significant challenges. Teachers report that limited time and difficulties in involving parents impact their ability to conduct comprehensive assessments. This finding is in line with Kangwa and Nyirenda (2023) who found that time limitations and lack of parental involvement are common barriers in early childhood education, affecting both the assessment process and overall student development. This is consistent with the experiences reported by teachers in Choma District, where the need for more time and better parental engagement was emphasised.

5.3.3 Inadequate teaching materials and limited classroom space

Inadequate teaching materials and limited outdoor space further exacerbate these challenges. The study reveals that the lack of resources, such as toys and textbooks, along with small classroom and outdoor spaces, restricts the scope of assessments. These are in line with the findings by Banda and Chanda (2021), who noted that insufficient materials and space can negatively affect the quality of early childhood education and assessments.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving the effectiveness of school readiness assessments. Reducing class sizes, improving resource availability, providing better classroom space, and enhancing parental engagement could significantly enhance assessment practices and educational outcomes. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to support ECE teachers in Choma District and ensure more effective assessments and improved educational experiences for young learners.

5.3.4 The effects of challenges on teaching practice

The challenges faced by ECE teachers in Choma District significantly affect their teaching practices. Limited classroom space prevents the effective implementation of planned activities, particularly outdoor ones, leading to a less engaging learning environment. This is supported with

the findings by Mwewa, (2022) who posts that teachers report that this spatial constraint limits their ability to conduct hands-on activities and makes teaching less effective

Time management is another critical issue. Teachers handling multiple classes face difficulties in covering all planned subjects within the short periods allocated. This results in incomplete lessons and frequent rescheduling, as noted by previous research. This is in support with the findings by Phiri and Banda (2021) who highlighted that time constraints in early childhood education often lead to a reduced ability to complete planned activities, affecting overall teaching quality. This aligns with the current study's findings that teachers struggle to meet educational goals due to inadequate time for comprehensive teaching and assessment. The lack of parental support further exacerbates these challenges. Teachers face difficulties in engaging parents, which hampers the reinforcement of learning at home. This finding is consistent with research findings by Kangwa and Nyirenda (2023), which highlighted that low parental involvement negatively impacts teaching effectiveness and student progress. Additionally, learners being sent to help with household chores disrupts their attendance and learning continuity, further complicating the teaching process.

These challenges collectively hinder the ability of ECE teachers in Choma District to effectively implement planned activities, manage time efficiently, and engage learners fully. Addressing these issues through improvements in classroom space, time management, and parental involvement is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and ensuring better educational outcomes for young learners.

The study identified several strategies that ECE teachers in Choma District believe would enhance the effectiveness of school readiness assessments. Key recommendations that teachers made include that of having more diverse assessment tools and teaching materials that would improve their ability to assess and support students effectively. The recommendation aligns with findings by Mumba and Mwansa (2022), who found that the availability of varied teaching resources significantly improves the quality of early childhood education. Providing additional materials like toys and games supports more interactive and engaging learning experiences, which can make assessments more comprehensive and accurate.

The findings revealed multiple challenges, including over-enrollment, inadequate learning spaces, and children's varying moods, which hinder teachers' ability to conduct effective school readiness assessments. These challenges contradict Social Constructivism, which relies heavily on social interaction and individualized scaffolding to support learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (Thinkific, 2024). Similarly, time constraints limit opportunities for interactive and formative assessments, which are central to the constructivist approach. The lack of conducive learning environments undermines teachers' ability to observe and interact with learners naturally, which is critical for constructing an authentic understanding of readiness.

Moreover, challenges such as language barriers and absenteeism expose contradictions with the theory's reliance on cultural and social contexts for learning. Vygotsky emphasised that learning is mediated through language and cultural tools; however, when children face language barriers or inconsistent attendance, their social interaction with teachers and peers is disrupted (Saleem et al, 2022). This inhibits the co-construction of knowledge and progress within the ZPD. While teachers attempt to adapt their strategies, such as grouping learners for remedial activities, the systemic challenges they face highlight the gap between the constructivist ideals of active, social learning and the realities of resource-constrained environments. Therefore, while the challenges contradict the theory's principles, they underscore the need for structural interventions to create environments conducive to social constructivist practices.

5.4 Chapter summary

Chapter five highlighted that ECE teachers generally found the assessments effective and significantly impactful on their teaching practices, demonstrating high confidence in interpreting and using assessment results. The chapter detailed several challenges faced by teachers, including limited space, time constraints, and inadequate resources, which affected their ability to conduct thorough assessments. Teachers also expressed the need for additional resources, improved learning environments, and extra support to enhance assessment effectiveness.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study and provides recommendations aimed at improving school readiness assessments in Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms in Choma District. The conclusions are based on the research objectives, including the types of assessment tools used, the perceptions of teachers, and the challenges they face. The recommendations offer practical strategies for teachers, schools, and the government to enhance the effectiveness of these assessments and improve overall early childhood education practices.

6.1 Conclusion of the study

The study concluded that the practices used by ECE teachers in Choma District to conduct school readiness assessments were largely traditional, focusing on observational techniques and checklists. Most teachers relied heavily on these basic methods due to limited resources and training. While these approaches helped teachers identify some readiness indicators, they were not sufficient for assessing the full range of skills required for school readiness, such as emotional and social development. More innovative and diverse methods were needed to improve the accuracy of these assessments. Teachers needed access to specialized assessment tools that could evaluate learners' cognitive, language, and motor skills more effectively. The reliance on basic tools and methods limited teachers' ability to gather detailed information on each child’s readiness for school, underscoring the need for more comprehensive assessment practices.

ECE teachers in Choma District primarily used limited types of assessment tools, such as checklists and informal observations. These tools focused mainly on basic skills, leaving gaps in assessing other important areas of development. While these tools provided some insights into the children’s readiness for school, they were not comprehensive enough to capture the full picture of a child's preparedness. Teachers expressed the need for a broader variety of assessment tools. The limited availability of assessment tools hindered teachers' ability to assess children's readiness in a well-rounded manner. The study concluded that expanding the range of tools available to

teachers would enable them to conduct more thorough assessments and better support each learner's transition into formal education.

The perceptions of ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments varied, but many reported facing significant challenges. Teachers in Choma District often struggled with overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and time constraints, making it difficult to assess each learner properly. These limitations affected the quality of assessments, as teachers could not dedicate enough attention to individual learners or use a variety of tools to evaluate readiness comprehensively. Despite these challenges, some teachers found ways to manage the assessment process, though they acknowledged that more support was needed. The study concluded that teachers' perceptions were shaped largely by the resources and support they received. With better materials, training, and assistance in the classroom, teachers would be better equipped to conduct school readiness assessments more effectively.

The study identified several major challenges faced by ECE teachers in Choma District when conducting school readiness assessments. These included limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, lack of parental involvement, and insufficient time for thorough assessments. These challenges negatively impacted teachers' ability to conduct comprehensive assessments, leaving many aspects of learners' readiness unaddressed. To overcome these challenges, the study suggested several strategies for improvement. These included providing more diverse and specialized assessment tools, improving classroom infrastructure, and offering additional training for teachers. Reducing class sizes and encouraging more parental involvement were also highlighted as important steps to enhance the effectiveness of school readiness assessments. By these strategies, schools could create a more supportive environment for both teachers and learners, ensuring more accurate assessments of school readiness

6.2 Suggestions of the study suggestions or recommendations?

This section presents the recommendations for teachers, the schools and for the government. Be specific onWho in the government? MOE, CDC etc

I. Enhancing the frequency and methods of assessments: Teachers should adopt a clear and structured approach to school readiness assessments. The use of daily observations and

monthly evaluations to monitor progress, with end of term assessments as part of the schedule. Provide training for teachers in efficient methods to ensure assessments are effective and minimise classroom disruptions.

II. Strengthening screening as the foundation of assessments: Screening is conducted at the entry point and continues for one to two weeks. It helps assess readiness, guide placement, and determine developmental needs of the learners. (this is not necessary for a recommendation) It is also recommended that teachers develop a standardised screening framework for early childhood education learners to ensure consistency in evaluating school readiness across different schools.

III. Expanding the use of observation for comprehensive assessment**:** Use observation to track children's progress in ECE without disrupting them. Provide clear rubrics for consistent recording and encourage using digital platforms to document and analyse observations. This is not a recommendation

IV. Improving the use of standardized and teacher-made tools: Teachers use a mix of standardized tools like CDATZ and ICLAP, as well as their own teacher-made assessment tools. These tools help assess different developmental domains. Expand access to standardised assessment tools like ICLAP while incorporating localised teacher-made tools to reflect the community and cultural contexts. Offer training workshops to help teachers refine their own assessment tools and integrate them effectively with standardised frameworks. This is not a recommendation

V. Ensuring alignment of assessment methods with curriculum Objectives: Teachers align assessments with curriculum objectives, ensuring a holistic evaluation of cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development. Recommendations don’t describe anything. This is unecessary. Develop clear assessment guidelines that explicitly align with early childhood curriculum objectives, ensuring all developmental domains are consistently assessed.

VI. Strengthening targeted methods for assessing developmental domains: Teachers use various tools to assess motor skills, social-emotional development, and literacy, but structured evaluation methods are needed. This is not a recommendation.Develop clear framework to guide assessments in each area.

VII. Enhancing the integration of technology in assessments: Tablets provided by ZOCS are used for standardised assessments, improving efficiency and accuracy.This is not phrased as recommendation. Expand access to digital assessment tools by ensuring all ECE centers have adequate tablets and software support. Provide digital literacy training for teachers to maximise the effective use of technology in assessments.

VIII. promoting assessments for instructional improvement and adaptation: Teachers use assessment results to refine their teaching methods, identifying areas where they need to adjust instructional strategies. (this does not sound like a recommendation) Introduce structured feedback mechanisms that allow teachers to reflect on assessment outcomes and adjust teaching strategies accordingly.

Suggestions for further studies

i. Future research could explore the long-term impact of improved school readiness assessments on learners' performance in primary education, focusing on how early interventions influence academic achievement and social development.

ii. Further studies could also investigate the role of parental involvement in enhancing school readiness in ECE classrooms, examining strategies to effectively engage parents in supporting their children's early learning at home and school.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Interview Schedule for Teachers

Assessing School Readiness Evaluation Practices by Early Childhood Education Teachers in Choma District Primary Schools

My name is Phiri Sylvia, a student at the University of Zambia and I am conducting a research study on early childhood education in Choma District. You have been identified as a potential participant, and I would like to invite you to take part in this important study. Your insights are crucial in helping us understand how Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in primary schools conduct school readiness assessments in Choma. Please take your time to consider whether you wish to participate. You are welcome to discuss this invitation with someone you trust before making a decision.

Purpose of the Research:

The aim of this study is to assess the perceptions of ECE teachers in Choma District on school readiness in primary schools. We want to understand the current practices, tools used, teacher perceptions, challenges faced, and potential strategies for improvement.

Confidentiality

Your privacy is of utmost importance. All information shared will be kept confidential, and your identity will be protected in any published results.

BIO DATA

Name of School: ……. Sex:……. Age:…….

No. of years in service: …… Grade taught: ……... Position in school…..…….

Highest Academic Qualification: …… Highest Professional Qualification: …….

Section 1: ECE Teachers School readiness Current Practices

1. Do you conduct school readiness assessment in your school?

2. Can you describe the methods and practices you currently use to assess school readiness in your Early Childhood Education (ECE) classroom?
3. How frequently do you conduct school readiness assessments, and what factors influence the timing and frequency of these assessments?
4. In your opinion, how well do the current practices and methods align with the developmental needs of the children in your ECE classroom?
5. Could you share specific examples of how you document and record the results of school readiness assessments in your daily teaching practices?
6. Are these assessments handed over to the primary school teacher? If so, how is this done and what are they used for?
7. Do you have any assessment tools that you use to conduct school readiness in your ECE class?
8. Can you discuss the types of assessment tools you commonly use to evaluate physical development in young children?
9. What tools or methods do you find most effective for assessing social and emotional development in your students?
10. How do you typically assess cognitive development, especially language and literacy skills, in your ECE classroom?
11. When it comes to evaluating creative development, which assessment tools or strategies do you rely on the most?

Section 2: To determine the perceptions of ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments.

Research Question: What are the perceptions of ECE teachers in Choma district regarding school readiness assessments?

Perceptions

1. How would you describe your overall perception of the effectiveness of school readiness assessments in preparing children for primary school?
2. To what extent do you believe school readiness assessments positively impact your teaching practices, and can you provide specific examples?
3. How confident do you feel in your ability to interpret and use the results of school readiness assessments to inform your teaching strategies?
4. From your perspective, what are the primary benefits of conducting school readiness assessments in the ECE setting?

Section 3: To establish challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments

Research Question: What challenges do ECE teachers face when conducting school readiness assessments in Choma district?

Challenges and Strategies for Improvement

1. What challenges do you encounter in conducting school readiness assessments, and how do these challenges affect your teaching practices?
2. Can you share specific strategies you currently use to address the challenges faced in conducting school readiness assessments?
3. In your opinion, what strategies could be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of school readiness assessments in ECE classrooms?
4. What support or resources do you believe would be most beneficial in overcoming challenges related to school readiness assessments in your teaching environment?

APPENDIX 2: Interview Schedule for School Managers

Assessing School Readiness Evaluation Practices by Early Childhood Education Teachers Choma district Primary Schools

My name is Phiri Sylvia, a student at the University of Zambia and I am conducting a research study on early childhood education in Choma District. You have been identified as a potential participant, and I would like to invite you to take part in this important study. Your insights are crucial in helping us understand how Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in primary schools conduct school readiness assessments in Choma. Please take your time to consider whether you wish to participate. You are welcome to discuss this invitation with someone you trust before making a decision.

Purpose of the Research:

The aim of this study is to assess the perceptions of ECE teachers in Choma District on school readiness in primary schools. We want to understand the current practices, tools used, teacher perceptions, challenges faced, and potential strategies for improvement.

Confidentiality

Your privacy is of utmost importance. All information shared will be kept confidential, and your Sidentity will be protected in any published results.

BIO DATA

Name of School: ……. Sex: ,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,…….

No. of years in service: ……. Age: ……. Position in school…..……

Highest academic qualification: …… Highest Professional Qualification: …….

Section 1: Current practices Used for School Readiness Assessments

1. Do you conduct school readiness assessment in your school?

2. Can you describe the current methods or approaches that Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers in your school use for conducting school readiness assessments?
3. In your opinion, what do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the methods employed by ECE teachers in assessing school readiness?
4. How do you ensure consistency and fairness in the application of school readiness assessment methods across different classrooms or teachers within your school?
5. Are there any specific challenges or successes related to the methods used for school readiness assessments that you have observed within your school?
6. What types of assessment tools are commonly used by ECE teachers in your school for evaluating the school readiness of students?
7. How do these assessment tools align with the curriculum objectives and learning outcomes for early childhood education in your school?
8. In your experience, have you noticed any variations in the use of assessment tools among different grade levels or classes within the early childhood education programmes?
9. Can you share any insights on the effectiveness of specific assessment tools in gauging the school readiness of students in your school?

Section 2: To determine the perceptions of ECE teachers toward school readiness assessments and their perceived effectiveness.

Research Question: What are the perceptions of ECE teachers in Choma district regarding school readiness assessments?

Perceptions of ECE Teachers on school readiness assessments

1. How do ECE teachers in your school generally perceive the importance of school readiness assessments in the overall development of students?
2. From your perspective, how do these perceptions influence the implementation and commitment of ECE teachers towards conducting effective school readiness assessments?

3. Are there any notable success stories or positive outcomes that can be attributed to the school readiness assessment practices in your school, as perceived by ECE teachers?
4. In what ways do you, as the headteacher, support and reinforce positive perceptions among ECE teachers regarding the effectiveness of school readiness assessments?

Section 3: To identify challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments

Research Question: What challenges do ECE teachers face when conducting school readiness assessments in Choma district?

Challenges Faced and Strategies for Improvement

1. Based on your observations, what are some common challenges faced by ECE teachers in conducting school readiness assessments in your school?
2. How does your school currently address or mitigate these challenges to ensure the smooth and effective implementation of school readiness assessments?
3. Are there any innovative or successful strategies that have been implemented to enhance the quality and efficiency of school readiness assessments within your school?
4. As the headteacher, how do you envision further improving the school readiness assessment process in your school, and what role do you see for yourself in overcoming challenges and fostering positive changes?

APPENDIX 3: Budget

SN	Description	Unit price	Total
1.	Printing proposal	K200	K400
2.	Printing Ethical Clearance	K500	K2000
3.	Payment of Ethical Clearance	K500	K500
4.	Note pads	K100	K500
5.	Recorders	K200	K400
6.	Staples, Stapler, Ream of Paper	K500	K500
7.	Proposal presentation	K2500	K2500
8.	Printing instruments	K500	K1000
9.	Transport	K2500	K2500
10.	Food	K2000	K2000
11.	Lodging	K1000	K1000
12.	Airtime and internet	K1500	K1500
13.	Printing dissertation	K500	K1000
14.	Defending dissertation	K2500	K2500
15.	Publication of article	K2000	K2000
		Total	**K19,300**

APPENDIX 4: Time Line

Activity	Period							
Formulating research title Writing proposal	Aug - Oct 2023							
Submission for approval		Nov 2023						
Proposal presentation			Dec 2023					
Data collection			A	Jan May 2024				
Data analysis					Jul – Aug 2024			
Report writing						Sep 2024		
submission for approval Making corrections							Nov 2024	
Defending								Dec 2024
Making corrections								
Final submission								

APPENDIX 5: Approval of Study

THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA

DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES

Great East Road Campus | P.O. Box 32379 | Lusaka10101 | Tel: +260-211-290 258/291 777 **Fax**: (+260)-211-290 258/253 952 | E-**mail**: director.drgs@unza.zm | Website: www.unza.zm

APPROVAL OF STUDY

IORG No. 0005376

HSSREC IRB No. 00006464

REF NO. HSSREC-2024-FEB-016

28th February, 2024

Ms. Sylvia Phiri

The University of Zambia

P.O. Box 32379

LUSAKA

Dear Ms. Phiri

RE: "**ASSESSING SCHOOL READINESS EVALUATION PRACTICES BY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS IN CHOMA DISTRICT PRIMARY SCHOOLS."**

Reference is made to your submission of the protocol captioned above. The HSSREC resolved to approve this study and your participation as Principal Investigator for a period of one year.

REVIEW TYPE	**ORDINARY REVIEW**	**APPROVAL NO. HSSREC:2024- FEB – 016**
Approval and Expiry Date	Approval Date: 28th February, 2024	Expiry Date: 27th February, 2025
Protocol Version and Date	Version - Nil.	27th February, 2025
Information Sheet, Consent Forms and Dates	□ English.	To be provided
Consent form ID and Date	Version - Nil	To be provided
Recruitment Materials	Nil	Nil
Other Study Documents	Questionnaire.	
Number of Participants Approved for Study		

Specific conditions will apply to this approval. As Principal Investigator it is your responsibility to ensure that the contents of this letter are adhered to. If these are not adhered to, the approval may be suspended. Should the study be suspended, study sponsors and other regulatory authorities will be informed.

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

- No participant may be involved in any study procedure prior to the study approval or after the expiration date.

- All unanticipated or Serious Adverse Events (SAEs) must be reported to HSSREC within 5 days.

- All protocol modifications must be approved by HSSREC prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk (but must still be reported for approval). Modifications will include any change of investigator/s or site address.

- All protocol deviations must be reported to HSSREC within 5 working days.

- All recruitment materials must be approved by HSSREC prior to being used.

- Principal investigators are responsible for initiating Continuing Review proceedings. HSSREC will only approve a study for a period of 12 months.

- It is the responsibility of the PI to renew his/her ethics approval through a renewal application to HSSREC.

- Where the PI desires to extend the study after expiry of the study period, documents for study extension must be received by HSSREC at least 30 days before the expiry date. This is for the purpose of facilitating the review process. Documents received within 30 days after expiry will be labelled “late submissions” and will incur a penalty fee of K500.00. No study shall be renewed whose documents are submitted for renewal 30 days after expiry of the certificate.

- Every 6 (six) months a progress report form supplied by The University of Zambia Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee as an IRB must be filled in and submitted to us. There is a penalty of K500.00 for failure to submit the report.

- When closing a project, the PI is responsible for notifying, in writing or using the

Research Ethics and Management Online (REMO), both HSSREC and the National Health Research Authority (NHRA) when ethics certification is no longer required for a project.

- In order to close an approved study, a Closing Report must be submitted in writing or through the REMO system. A Closing Report should be filed when data collection has ended and the study team will no longer be using human participants or animals or secondary data or have any direct or indirect contact with the research participants or animals for the study.

- Filing a closing report (rather than just letting your approval lapse) is important as it assists HSSREC in efficiently tracking and reporting on projects. Note that some funding agencies and sponsors require a notice of closure from the IRB which had approved the study and can only be generated after the Closing Report has been filed.

- A reprint of this letter shall be done at a fee.

- All protocol modifications must be approved by HSSREC by way of an application for an amendment prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce risk (but must still be reported for approval). Modifications will include any change of investigator/s or site address or methodology and methods. Many modifications entail minimal risk adjustments to a protocol and/or consent form and can be made on an Expedited basis (via the IRB Chair). Some examples are: format changes, correcting spelling errors, adding key personnel, minor changes to questionnaires, recruiting and changes, and so forth. Other, more substantive changes, especially those that may alter the risk-benefit ratio, may require Full Board review. In all cases, except where noted above regarding subject safety, any changes to any protocol document or procedure must first be approved by HSSREC before they can be implemented.

Should you have any questions regarding anything indicated in this letter, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us at the above indicated address.

On behalf of HSSREC, we would like to wish you all the success as you carry out your study.

Yours faithfully,

Dr. J.I. Ziwa

DR. J. I. Ziwa

CHAIRPERSON THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE - IRB

CC: Director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies
Assistant Director (Research), Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies Assistant
Registrar (Research), Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies