Quality of Planning Practices in Early Childhood Education Centres in Ghana: Directors’ Perspectives and Experiences

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Abstract: Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) directors are crucial for sustainable quality ECCD centre management, leading to a focus on efficient 21st-century practices. Planning principles are essential for managing the complexity of early childhood education services. This paper aimed to explore how ECCD directors plan management activities in their centres in Ghana. The study was conducted in sixteen ECCD centres located in five metropolitan and municipal districts within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The study involved 20 participants, including directors/head teachers and board members, selected using a purposive sampling strategy. Data were collected through interviews and document reviews. Although evidence from the study showed that ECCD directors put much effort into managing their centres, the study found that ECCD directors experience various challenges concerning applying the basic management principle of planning at their centres. In this article, the authors contend that planning is a crucial management function that sets achievable goals in line with the ECCD centre's vision and provides direction for actions to achieve ECCD goals. In addressing the identified challenges, the researchers developed a systems-based planning framework to guide directors in their planning roles at the ECCD centres.

Keywords: ECCD directors, management effectiveness, management efficiency, management principles, planning principles.

Introduction

This study explores the application of planning principles of directors at Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres in Ghana. ECCD generally covers the provision of care and schooling for children from birth to the age of eight (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2023). Ghana’s recent ECCD policy reform mandates directors to possess professional school management skills. Stakeholders emphasize directors’ vital role in establishing high-quality centres and prioritising modern management approaches (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016; Agih, 2015; Theisohn & Lopes, 2003).

Research on applying management principles in ECCD centres in Ghana has been limited, neglecting the utilisation of various management theories and the interconnectedness of ECCD systems. Prior studies by Ali and Abdalla (2017), Chukwumah (2015), Musingafi et al. (2014), Mustafa and Pranoto (2019), Pešalj et al. (2018), Strehmel (2016), Strunk et al. (2016), Thornton and Cherrington (2014) and VanGronigen et al. (2017), mainly focused on secondary school principals’ roles, in school improvement planning and organizational functions. The researchers in this study argue that previous studies, which focused on secondary school principals’ managerial roles, overlooked the comprehensive perspective of management principles within ECCD systems, particularly in Ghana. Unlike previous studies mainly conducted outside Ghana, this research delves into ECCD directors’ planning practices in Ghana. The empirical findings would enrich the existing literature by exploring how ECCD directors implement business management principles. The proposed planning framework would aid ECCD directors in understanding and implementing effective school improvement planning. This study fills a gap in research by focusing on ECCD, enhancing knowledge and awareness among ECCD directors and stakeholders. It contributes valuable insights into planning ECCD programmes for improved outcomes.

This research article stems from the lead author’s PhD thesis, examining ECCD directors’ management practices in five municipalities in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. It offers a literature review on quality planning practices in ECCD.
settings and details the research methodology and findings. A planning framework was developed from key data themes and best practices from the literature. The article also discusses recommendations, limitations, and implications of the study's findings.

**Literature Review**

**The Concept of Planning**

Planning, as outlined by scholars such as Kools and George (2020), Daft (2010) and Robbins et al. (2020), is a strategic management process integral to organisational success. It involves setting objectives, identifying mechanisms, and developing action plans to harmonise employee activities. Meyers and Van Groningen (2019) stress the importance of planning as a management function that establishes achievable goals aligned with the organisation’s vision, providing direction for actions to achieve objectives. Planning guides employee actions and serves as a benchmark for work performance by allocating resources, timeframes, and activities to achieve stated objectives, as noted by Caputo and Rastelli (2014). This strategic process is deemed essential for successful management in educational institutions like early childhood centres, enabling the execution of other managerial functions, as highlighted by Robbins et al. (2020).

**Key Components and Best Practices of Quality School Improvement Planning**

Meyers and Van Groningen (2019) outline key components of a quality school improvement planning process, emphasising elements like vision, actions, measures of progress, context, organisation, and resources. They stress the importance of crafting a succinct improvement plan that conveys a bold vision, exhibits commitment, and effectively communicates with both internal and external stakeholders (Duke, 2015; Meyers & VanGroningen, 2019). Engaging the school management team and community early in the vision-development stages fosters collective ownership and enhances acceptance of the final plan (Acton, 2021; Schildkamp, 2019; Wanjala & Rarieya, 2014). Acton (2021) and Strunk et al. (2016) highlight the significance of defining activities and progress actions, such as prioritisation, process results, progress metrics, and action steps. They recommend that the planning team identify and justify two to four key improvement activities for a specific implementation period, providing compelling rationales for each choice (Acton, 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021; Strunk et al., 2016). Moreover, Strunk et al. advocate for the inclusion of detailed process results for each priority, aligned with persuasive justifications, in a high-quality school improvement plan.

The vision statement is fundamental in a school’s improvement efforts, providing a vivid depiction of the institution’s desired future state (Kalman, 2020; Meyer et al., 2023). Serving as a guiding beacon, it aids stakeholders in understanding the purpose and direction of improvement initiatives (Van Groningen et al., 2023). A successful vision statement is concise yet inclusive, encapsulating the fundamental values, aspirations, and priorities of the school community (Van Groningen et al., 2023). It should align with the broader objectives and mission of the educational establishment, reflecting a shared vision among stakeholders (Mafratoglu et al., 2023). The engagement of stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, and community members, is indispensable in formulating a vision statement resonating with the entire school community (Al Ahbabi, 2019). Collaborative vision development cultivates ownership and dedication to the improvement process, fostering greater endorsement and support for implementation endeavours (Guzman, 2022). A well-crafted vision statement should align with identified improvement priorities and school goals, ensuring coherence and focus in improvement efforts (Krijnen et al., 2022). It should furnish a clear roadmap for addressing areas of need and propelling continuous improvement across all facets of the educational institution (Meyer et al., 2023; Meyers & Hitt, 2018).

Vision development is an ongoing endeavour requiring regular assessment and refinement to adapt to evolving needs, priorities, and external influences (Koh et al., 2023). Schools should establish mechanisms for soliciting feedback, evaluating progress, and adjusting the vision statement as necessary to maintain its relevance and effectiveness (Koh et al., 2023).

Recent research highlights the vital role of systematic planning in enhancing school improvement endeavours. Priyambodo and Hasanah (2021) stress the importance of aligning strategic objectives with the school’s mission and vision to ensure coherence and efficacy. Similarly, Bohanon et al. (2021) emphasise the necessity of collaborative and inclusive planning approaches that engage stakeholders across all levels of the education system. A central theme in the literature is the incorporation of data-informed decision-making into school improvement planning. VanGroningen et al. (2023) and Karagiorgi et al. (2015) illustrate how utilising student performance data can identify areas for enhancement and monitor progress over time. Likewise, Gonzales et al. (2022) underline the significance of digital tools and data analytics platforms in facilitating data-driven decision-making processes.

Stakeholder involvement emerges as a critical determinant of the success of school improvement planning. Mbogo and Mugwe (2023) argue that meaningful engagement with stakeholders, encompassing teachers, parents, and community members, nurtures ownership and commitment to the improvement agenda. Additionally, Meyer et al. (2023) advocate for diverse stakeholder participation in goal-setting and decision-making processes to ensure relevance and sustainability.

Monitoring and evaluation are crucial for effective school improvement planning, enabling progress tracking, intervention assessment, and accountability. Kalman (2020) highlights directors’ role in identifying strengths and
The Roles of ECCD Directors in School Improvement Planning Process and Challenges

Directors play a critical role in driving forward school improvement planning initiatives. They are tasked with defining a unified vision, fostering stakeholder involvement, and effectively managing resource allocation (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Additionally, directors offer guidance to employees and establish benchmarks for performance by aligning resources, schedules, and tasks with predefined goals (Caputo & Rastelli, 2014). While school improvement planning is crucial, directors encounter a range of obstacles during implementation, such as resource constraints, resistance from stakeholders, and shifts in educational policies (Dunaway et al., 2012; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2020). Nevertheless, recent research identifies avenues for directors to improve planning strategies. Technological advancements provide innovative solutions for data analysis and decision-making (Adolfsson & Häkansson, 2021). Additionally, collaborative approaches involving stakeholders can foster more comprehensive and efficient planning processes (Koh et al., 2023).

Several studies have shed light on the challenges encountered during the planning and execution of improvement plans in Ghanaian basic schools. For instance, Kwaah and Nishimuko (2023) identified insufficient funding and resource allocation as obstacles that hinder the effective implementation of plans. Leadership’s critical role in facilitating successful school enhancement planning processes is emphasised in the literature. Kwaah and Ampiah (2018) highlighted the pivotal contribution of headteachers in creating an enabling environment for efficient planning and execution. Ahasu et al. (2024) emphasised the significance of community involvement and support in school improvement planning. They found that the active participation of parents and community members positively influenced planning outcomes. Resource constraints have been identified as a significant obstacle in school improvement planning in Ghanaian basic schools. For example, Kwaah and Ampiah (2018) revealed that inadequate funding and infrastructure hindered the effective planning and implementation processes. Kwaah and Ampiah (2018) underscored the importance of directors’ proficiency in school improvement planning. They noted that insufficient training and professional development opportunities for directors posed challenges to the effectiveness of planning processes. Another challenge in school improvement planning is the lack of engagement from the community. Aryeh-Adjei (2021) found that the limited involvement of parents and community members in planning discussions hindered the development of comprehensive improvement plans.

The effective use of data for decision-making is a cornerstone of performance improvement planning, but it can be challenging for school principals to collect, analyse, and interpret relevant data. According to O’Brien et al. (2017), directors often face difficulties in accessing timely and accurate data, especially in under-resourced schools or districts. Moreover, Adolfsson and Häkansson (2021) highlight the lack of training and expertise in data analysis among school leaders as a barrier to leveraging data effectively to inform improvement strategies. The literature review extensively covers planning concepts, essential components, and best practices in high-quality school improvement planning, alongside examining the roles of directors and the challenges they encounter during implementation. However, it highlights several deficiencies, including a lack of exploration of integrating technology into planning processes and addressing insufficient funding and resource allocation, especially in Ghanaian basic schools. Strategies to enhance director training and professional development and effective methods for engaging parents and community members in planning discussions are also inadequately addressed. Similarly, it lacks a thorough discussion on overcoming challenges in accessing timely and accurate data and improving expertise in data analysis. Regarding monitoring and evaluation in school improvement planning, the literature review acknowledges its significance but identifies various gaps. It fails to thoroughly explore how factors like school size, demographics, resources, and location influence monitoring and evaluation effectiveness. Limited discussion on measuring the impact of interventions, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement, particularly involving students and community members, is noted. Moreover, the potential of technology to enhance monitoring and evaluation processes is overlooked. The researchers in this study believe that addressing these gaps would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how the key components of school improvement planning can effectively support school improvement planning, resulting in quality ECCD outcomes.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

i. How do directors plan management activities at ECCD centres?

ii. What appropriate planning framework could improve the quality of planning practices of directors at ECCD centres in Ghana?
Methodology

Research Approach

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach. The researchers wanted to understand the participants’ experiences and how they view their ECCD centre management planning practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researchers reasoned that by using document reviews and interviews as techniques for gathering data for a qualitative study, the ECCD directors taking part in it would be able to share their planning experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers chose a qualitative research approach because it is an interactive approach and allows for the generation of detailed data. During the interviews, the researchers had the opportunity to ask questions and have direct conversations with the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The participants in the study were given the chance to share their experiences through their voices and words. Using a qualitative approach allowed the researchers to assess and interpret the participants’ experiences with ECCD centre planning practices.

Research Design

This study used a case study design due to its flexibility to various environments, procedures, groups and individuals. Yin (2018) asserts that a case study design is suitable when using a qualitative research approach because it allows the researcher to do a detailed study on the phenomenon of interest in a natural setting. In addition, it allows the researchers to interact with participants through questions and answers to gain deep insights into multiple meanings that the participants assign to their ECCD centre planning experiences.

Sample and Data Collection

The study employed purposive sampling, a qualitative research technique, to select participants who could potentially offer comprehensive data and detailed accounts of their experiences. The researchers reached out to the Director General of the Ghana Education Service and Directors of the ECCD centres to request access to the sixteen ECCD centres. With the help of the list of ECCD centres officially obtained from the National Inspectorate Directorate of Ghana Education Service, all sixteen ECCD centres were selected. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the interview participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants code names</th>
<th>Type of Participant/ Centre [Private/Public]</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P 1</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 3</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 4</td>
<td>Private Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 5</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 6</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 7</td>
<td>Private Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 8</td>
<td>Private Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 9</td>
<td>Private Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 10</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 11</td>
<td>Private Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P 12</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27 years</td>
</tr>
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<td>Private Centre Director</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
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<td>Private Centre Director</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
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<td>P 15</td>
<td>Public Centre Director</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>29 years</td>
</tr>
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<td>Private Centre Director</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
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<td>P 17</td>
<td>Private Centre Board Member</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>2 years</td>
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<td>P 18</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>4 years</td>
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<td>P 19</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
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<td>P 20</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Methods

Document analysis was used to complement the interview method, providing context and background data. Key documents reviewed included school performance improvement plans, meeting minutes, and reports. The researchers compared and contrasted these documents with interview data to cross-reference and verify facts. They also used official records from ECCD centres to validate interview data (Wood et al., 2020).
The data collection strategy involved personal individual semi-structured interviews conducted by phone, with separate protocols for ECCD directors and selected board members. The questions were based on the research questions, and the interviews involved direct interaction between the researchers and the participants. Before starting, the researchers obtained permission and informed consent from the Director General of the Ghana Education Service and the selected ECCD directors and board members.

Consent letters were given to the participants, which they signed and returned to show their acceptance to participate in the study voluntarily. The study took place during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). As a result, interview appointments and all interviews were conducted via telephone. The interview with the participants lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants gave consent to record the interviews. The interview format included an introduction, a main interview, and a closing phase. In the introduction, the researchers assured confidentiality, explained the study’s aim, and obtained permission to record. The main interview involved biographical and in-depth questions on ECCD centre management planning, challenges, and solutions, using open-ended and probing questions to gather comprehensive information. All the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed. The participants in the interview were assigned code names as per the information provided in Table 1.

**Analysing of Data**

The researchers used a thematic analysis technique to analyse the interview data and a content analysis technique for document analysis. The researchers adhered to the qualitative data analysis procedures outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018), which included the following steps:

After transcribing all audio-recorded interviews verbatim immediately following the interview, the researchers identified common emerging ideas to adjust subsequent interview questions accordingly. Utilising QSR Nvivo 20.2 software, the researchers created a codebook and data analysis matrix to track code frequencies and fundamental themes. Next, the researchers reviewed all interview transcripts and accompanying documents, jotting down overarching concepts in the margins of the data analysis matrix. These concepts were then condensed into codes for both primary and secondary topics. The researchers developed codes and categories by scrutinising the most descriptive language used in the transcripts. The categories were further condensed to establish overarching themes. Employing data reduction techniques such as categorisation and coding facilitated detailed descriptions and interpretations of interview participants, serving as the basis for the study’s findings and conclusions.

The content analysis method used for the analysis of the data generated via document reviews involved interpreting the content of the documents collected by systematically analysing its meaning and context. Specifically, the following steps were followed:

The researchers clearly outlined the research questions that guided the content analysis. They selected pertinent content sources aligned with these questions and proceeded to gather the necessary documents for analysis. Once the relevant documents were compiled, a systematic review process ensued, during which initial codes and categories were identified to encapsulate essential concepts, themes, or patterns. These initial codes informed the creation of a comprehensive codebook, delineating codes, definitions, and illustrative examples, thereby ensuring consistency across coders.

Following the development of the codebook, the researchers systematically applied the established codes to the entire dataset, enabling the identification of emerging patterns and themes through inductive analysis. Subsequently, the coded data were scrutinised within the framework of the research questions and pertinent literature. The researchers delved into interpreting the significance of the identified themes, elucidating their contribution to understanding the school improvement planning practices of ECCD directors.

To bolster the credibility of the findings, the researchers conducted member checking. Subsequently, the findings were presented coherently and engagingly, utilising quotes, examples, and thematic summaries to elucidate pivotal insights. Furthermore, the implications of the findings and their potential contributions to the existing body of literature and practical applications were discussed.

**Ensuring the Trustworthiness of the Findings**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers followed the four trustworthiness measures recommended by Lincoln and Guba (2013): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following paragraphs describe how these criteria were utilised in this study.

**Credibility:** The researchers established credibility through member-checking, providing interviewees with transcripts for confirmation of their responses. They disclosed their positionality to acknowledge potential biases. Additionally, participants’ words were directly quoted to enrich the data presentation.

**Transferability:** To ensure transferability, the researchers furnished ample contextual and background details about the case sites. This allows readers to make comparisons with other cases.
**Dependability:** The researchers also offered a detailed account of the research process, facilitating reproducibility in similar contexts. This ensures clarity regarding the study’s methodology. They utilised excerpts from interview analysis to provide rich data descriptions, aiding contextual understanding and data interpretation.

**Confirmability:** To confirm findings, the researchers triangulated data from interviews and document reviews, detailing analysis processes for verification. They maintained a reflexive journal to document fieldwork incidents, serving as an audit trail for researchers.

**Findings**

The findings are presented in terms of themes that emerged from the document reviews and the interview data. The themes are presented through direct quotes from the participants.

**Vision statement:** The study found that ECCD centre planning often involves reviewing and updating mission, vision, and guiding principles, though many of the sampled plans lack alignment with national priorities, indicating potential technical gaps. Some centres effectively engage stakeholders, with positive attributes observed in those accessing external support and utilising Ministry of Education frameworks. Directors typically lead self-reviews with internal stakeholder support, indicating well-established structures with designated planning time and regular meetings. However, some centres lack adequate stakeholder involvement, with directors often bearing sole planning responsibility, suggesting underutilisation of support mechanisms and structured frameworks. The following sample quote captured experiences shared by some participants during the interviews:

> I usually call a meeting with my staff during which we review our performance, state improvement visions and what we should do to improve our children’s performance. Currently, we don’t have a functional PTA and SMC. We are now trying to form the SMC. My husband and I make most of the decisions when we are planning for the centre, but in case there is something my teachers need to know, I inform them. (P9: Private Director).

**Assessment of ECCD centre-community needs:** The study found that some ECCD centres conduct research and needs assessments, utilising data on students’ academic performance and parent demographics to justify planning improvements and align with missions and stakeholder values. Assessments prioritise both internal and external factors, focusing on access, quality, management, and academic performance. While positive practices include addressing children’s learning needs, limitations arise from relying solely on quantitative data and overlooking qualitative inputs. Despite involvement from directors, teachers, school improvement support officers, and parents’ association members, there is a lack of collaborative systems among ECCD centres, parents, and communities in planning participation. The following interview excerpts captured the views of some participants about what their ECCD centre needs assessments entail.

> …Appraisal of the centre’s performance through SWOT analysis helps us to know our strengths and weaknesses. Root cause analysis is a way of detecting the centre’s needs that must be addressed during the centre’s performance improvement planning and development priorities. We also collect data on children’s place of residence and the occupations of their parents. This helps us to plan for access… (P1: Public Director).

**Formulating ECCD centre improvement plans:** Based on the data from the interviews and documents reviewed, it was observed that certain ECCD centres draft performance improvement plans to outline actions, timelines, responsible individuals, and necessary resources for achieving goals and objectives. Directors emphasised the significance of this planning phase in delineating the steps and timelines required to meet objectives. Some ECCD centres prioritise identifying key improvement areas, including performance indicators and resource allocation. Planning structures involved directors, committees, and teachers to varying extents. However, numerous public and private centres lack formal planning procedures, primarily engaging for Capitation Grant compliance. Professional development opportunities are scarce, with sporadic external support, and the involvement of school management committees and parent associations is minimal, which hampers community engagement in planning and funding initiatives. Below are some of the experiences shared by the interview participants:

> …with the help of my teachers, we developed an annual implementation activity plan that we implement termly and it contains our targets, objectives, start date and end date, person responsible, resources needed and expected outcomes. So, at the end of the year, I write a self-analysis report that we use for the next cycle of planning… (P12: Public Director).

**Monitoring and evaluation:** The study found that some ECCD centres create annual action plans detailing clear targets, funding sources, responsibilities, milestones, and performance indicators. While most private ECCD directors monitor children’s progress through academic performance and parental feedback, public centres review children’s records to monitor test results for improvement planning. However, many centres appear to lack a connection between planning inputs, processes and outcomes, with few specifying measures to gauge implementation progress. Despite claims of improvements, evidence is lacking, suggesting an absence or lax accountability. Overall, most centres appear to lack

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systems for monitoring and reporting improvements to school management committees, parents' associations, and members of the communities. The following interview excerpt captured experiences shared by some of the participants.

Planning for action implementation and monitoring system during our planning process is necessary as it helps me to evaluate whether the plan has achieved the expected outcomes...In my experience, I know that if you do not measure results, you cannot tell success from failure and if you cannot see success, you cannot reward it. In addition, if you cannot reward success, you are probably rewarding failure and if you cannot see success, you cannot learn from it. If you cannot recognise failure, you cannot correct it. I have observed that if you can demonstrate results, you can win stakeholder support. So, you see, continuous data gathering is the main priority of my monitoring and information system. I write termly reports to the school management committee and we use it to assess the success of our improvement plan...We even have a way of plotting children's progress graphically... (P15: Public Director).

This study found several shortcomings in samples of the performance improvement plans reviewed. Firstly, there was a notable absence of active involvement from relevant stakeholders and inclusive policies for disadvantaged children. Additionally, many plans lacked clear justifications for prioritising certain improvement areas to achieve the ECCD centre's vision. Furthermore, detailed process outcomes, the proper connection between management results and targets, and specific expected outcomes for each performance target were also lacking in most plans reviewed. In addition, action steps for stated priorities were often routine and not innovative, indicating only partial alignment with process outcomes.

Finally, internal alignment of performance improvement targets, ECCD centre context, expected outcomes, and actionable steps with the centre's main improvement vision was poor in many sampled plans. Specific activities were primarily assigned to the chairperson of the ECCD management committee, the chairperson of the parents' association, and the ECCD director, indicating a lack of role distribution among all stakeholders. Additionally, information on available support for ECCD centres, aside from Government of Ghana funding sources, and details on continuous environmental scanning for extra funding sources were lacking in most improvement plans reviewed.

Discussion

This research delves into the planning practices of directors within early childhood education centres in Ghana. Ahasu et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of community engagement in shaping the vision for school improvement and providing support during the planning phase. The analysis of this study's findings indicates a significant lack of active involvement from various stakeholders during the formulation of improvement plans, potentially impacting their willingness to support plan implementation. This finding aligns with Aryeh-Adjei (2021) observations in her research on school improvement practices in Ghanaian basic schools, where limited participation of parents and community members was found to be hindering the development of comprehensive school improvement plans. Consequently, the researchers argue that involving key stakeholders, such as parents and community members, in shaping improvement visions for early childhood development centres can positively influence planning outcomes. This assertion is supported by Guzman (2022), who contends that collaborative vision development in quality school improvement planning fosters ownership and commitment to the improvement process, thereby garnering greater endorsement and support for implementation efforts.

Additionally, a meticulously formulated vision statement ought to correspond with identified improvement priorities and ECCD objectives, guaranteeing consistency and concentration in improvement efforts. Further, it should furnish a transparent roadmap for tackling areas of necessity and driving continuous enhancement across all aspects of education (Krijnen et al., 2022). Conversely, this research revealed that numerous sampled plans lacked explicit justifications for prioritising specific areas of improvement to realise the vision of the ECCD centre. These findings underscore the importance of a well-crafted vision statement in early childhood education centres. Ideally, such a vision statement should be closely aligned with the identified improvement priorities and objectives of the ECCD, ensuring that efforts are concentrated and coherent. Furthermore, it should provide a clear roadmap for addressing areas that require attention and for fostering continuous improvement across all aspects of ECCD within the centre. However, the study uncovered a notable discrepancy: many of the plans examined did not adequately justify why certain areas were prioritised for improvement to fulfill the ECCD centre's vision. This suggests a potential gap in the planning process, where the rationale behind prioritisation decisions may not have been sufficiently articulated or considered.

The findings from this study shed light on various aspects of quality improvement planning practices within Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres, particularly focusing on needs assessment, collaborative planning, and the utilisation of data for decision-making.

Firstly, the study emphasises the importance of conducting thorough needs assessments as a fundamental component of quality improvement planning. It reveals that while some ECCD centres do conduct needs assessments, these assessments often rely heavily on quantitative data related to student's academic performance and parent demographics. While this quantitative data provides valuable insights, the study suggests that there is a tendency to overlook qualitative
inputs, which could offer a more nuanced understanding of the needs of both the students and the community. Additionally, it highlights the importance of addressing both internal and external factors in these assessments, including access, quality, management, and academic performance.

However, despite efforts from various stakeholders including directors, teachers, school improvement support officers, and parents’ association members, there appears to be a lack of collaborative systems among ECCD centres, parents, and communities in the planning process. This suggests a need for improved communication and coordination among these entities to ensure that planning efforts are comprehensive and inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the study points out shortcomings in the specificity and detail of root cause analyses within some sampled school improvement plans. It notes that while most school improvement plans include targets, expected outcomes, and actionable stages, they often lack detailed timelines and logical arrangements to achieve these outcomes. This indicates a potential gap in directors’ understanding of how to effectively use diverse data sources for identifying performance gaps and developing school improvement plans to address them.

The researchers attribute these challenges to a lack of training and expertise among ECCD directors in data gathering, analysis, and interpretation. This aligns with previous findings by O’Brien et al. (2017), who highlighted the difficulties that directors face in accessing timely and accurate data, particularly in under-resourced schools or districts.

The findings underscore the importance of conducting comprehensive needs assessments, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and enhancing directors’ capacity in data-driven decision-making to inform quality improvement planning within ECCD centres. The researchers argue that addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring that ECCD centres effectively meet the needs of the children and communities they serve.

This study underscores the vital role of monitoring and evaluation in the success of school improvement plans. Transparent communication of evaluation results is essential for fostering accountability, trust, and a culture of continuous learning within school communities. While some ECCD centres have taken commendable steps by developing detailed annual action plans, there is a significant gap between planning and implementation in many centres. This gap, characterised by a lack of measures to track progress and weak accountability, hinders the effectiveness of improvement efforts and undermines trust and transparency.

The findings reveal a discrepancy with the assertions of Kalman (2020), highlighting that many ECCD centres are not effectively utilising monitoring and evaluation tools. This points to a crucial need for better implementation of these processes. The study advocates for regular monitoring as it enables ECCD directors to make informed decisions, allocate resources effectively, and continuously improve their centres by reinforcing strengths and addressing weaknesses. By emphasising informed decision-making and targeted resource allocation, the study highlights the substantial benefits of robust monitoring and evaluation systems in achieving sustainable improvements in ECCD settings.

Based on the themes that emerged from the study, and the quality planning indicators discussed in the literature, the researchers proposed a systems-based planning framework (See Figure 1) to guide ECCD directors. The researchers argue that quality ECCD improvement planning can be achieved using a systems-based approach by making efficient and sufficient use of planning inputs, processes and outputs. In addition, the effective utilisation of the twelve quality planning steps can help ECCD directors in achieving quality planning at their centres.
This study explores the application of planning principles of directors at Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres in Ghana. In addressing the first research question, which investigates how directors plan management activities at ECCD centres, the findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the lack of stakeholder involvement in school improvement planning at ECCD centres. It emphasizes the need for directors to better engage parents and community members. The importance of using both quantitative and qualitative data in needs assessments is underscored. The study critiques the reliance on quantitative data alone and calls for considering a broader range of factors. It also identifies the need for better training for directors in data utilisation due to shortcomings in root cause analyses.

Regarding addressing the second research question, which seeks to identify an appropriate planning framework to enhance the quality of planning practices of directors at ECCD centres in Ghana, the researchers used the themes that emerged from the study, and the quality planning indicators discussed in the literature, to propose a systems-based planning framework (See figure 1) to guide ECCD directors.
The findings of this study have implications for both theory, practice and policy:

Implications for Theory: The study calls for expanding stakeholder theory to actively involve parents and community members in school improvement planning. It advocates for using both quantitative and qualitative data in needs assessments for a holistic approach. Highlighting the need for better training in data utilisation for directors, it suggests addressing this gap in theoretical frameworks. The study supports collaborative planning frameworks among ECCD centres, parents, and communities, and stresses incorporating robust monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure continuous feedback, transparency, and accountability.

Implications for Practice: Directors at ECCD centres should involve parents and community members more effectively in school improvement planning for greater inclusivity. Practitioners need to use both quantitative and qualitative data in comprehensive needs assessments. Enhanced training programmes for directors are necessary to improve their data skills. Better communication and coordination with parents and communities should be fostered to include diverse perspectives in planning. Directors should create school improvement plans with clear timelines and logical sequences for efficient implementation. ECCD centres should establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems for transparency and continuous learning. Adopting the proposed framework will help directors develop quality improvement plans with clear vision statements and aligned priorities, enhancing ECCD outcomes.

Implications for Policy: Policies should mandate the involvement of parents and community members in school improvement planning at ECCD centres. They should require using both quantitative and qualitative data in needs assessments for a holistic understanding of ECCD needs. Additionally, policies should support training programmes focused on data utilisation for ECCD directors to address shortcomings in root cause analyses. By addressing these theoretical, practical, and policy implications, the study aims to enhance the planning practices of ECCD directors, leading to more effective and inclusive school improvement planning.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are suggested for practitioners, policymakers, and future research:

The researchers recommend that ECCD directors acquire knowledge and skills in business management principles of planning to address identified quality planning gaps.

The researchers further recommend that to achieve effective and efficient planning, ECCD directors should take into consideration the following enabling factors: active engagement of internal and external ECCD stakeholders; mobilisation of adequate funding and support from stakeholders; use of demographic data of children and parents; ensuring availability of internal and external planning supports and their effective utilisation as well as ensuring ECCD directors and planning team members acquire adequate knowledge and skills in management principles of planning.

The researchers also recommend the proposed systems-based planning framework for consideration by ECCD directors to guide them in their improvement planning practices.

The Ghana Education Service should consider developing a checklist for quality improvement planning to guide ECCD directors.

This study is exploratory in nature. For future research, it is suggested that the proposed framework for performance improvement planning of ECCD centres in Ghana could be used to carry out similar studies in other regions or countries to validate the suitability of the proposed school improvement planning framework.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that the sample size was limited to twenty semi-structured interviews involving sixteen ECCD directors and four board members due to time and resource constraints. By involving diverse ECCD stakeholders such as parents, teachers, community members, and officers from the district education office, with a larger sample size, richer and more in-depth data on directors’ planning practices could have been gathered to improve the findings. This weakness was strengthened by triangulating data from the interviews with the document review data.

Ethics Statements

Before conducting the study, the researchers applied for and received a certificate of ethical clearance from the College of Education’s Ethics Review Committee (CEDU REC), UNISA, (clearance number: 2021/06/09/60902436/03/AM). The researchers obtained official permission from the Ghana Education Service's Head Quarters, Division of Early Childhood Education, and approval was granted to carry out the research in its ECCD centres in the selected Metropolitan and Municipal districts in the Greater Accra Region. Similarly, the researchers sent official letters to ECCD centres to request their permission to participate in the study.
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Conflict of Interest
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Anyidoho: Concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis/interpretation, drafting manuscript. Ogina: Critical revision of manuscript, supervision and final approval.

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