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Investigating Obstacles to Early Childhood Education Access in Rural Malawi: Challenges and Possible Solutions - A Case Study of T/A Kapeni, Blantyre, Malawi.

Mercy Sharon Malinda¹, Dr. MugundhaRajan²

¹MSW-PIME, St. Eugene University, Zambia

²Lecturer at DMI-St. Eugene University in Zambia.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the barriers to accessing Early Childhood Education (ECE) in rural Malawi, with a focus on Traditional Authority (T/A) Kapeni. The study utilized a mixed-methods framework, using demographic profiling, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews to examine the lived experiences of parents, and institutional stakeholders. The findings indicate that multiple issues hinder children's access to ECE services, including economic difficulties, food poverty, extensive travel distances, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient teacher preparation.

The study demonstrates that the community is quite strong and that parents cherish ECE, even with these challenges. Local activities like farming in schools, enforcing traditional leadership, and volunteering show that people are serious about making access simpler. But systemic issues, such as inadequate finance, ineffective monitoring frameworks, and the lack of coordinated policies, hinder growth and its sustainability.

The study shows that legislative, community, and institutional actions must work together to make ECE more available in rural areas. Suggestions include expanding public funding, making school nutrition a part of national goals, making caregiver or teacher hiring more formal, and making governance more inclusive. These principles can help make early education systems that are equitable, responsive, and long-lasting, and that consider the needs of communities that are not getting enough aid.

Keywords: Access Barriers, Early Childhood Education (ECE), Community Based Child Care (CBCCs), Parental Engagement, Policy and Equity

1. Introduction

The Topic's Background

As of 2024, just 34% of children in Malawi were in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs. This means that 66% of children do not have the basic abilities they need to achieve effectively in school and in life (Ministry of Education, 2024).

ECE is very important for the growth of every child. It sets the stage for future success in school, in relationships, and in managing one's emotions. Malawians know how important ECE is, yet there are still a lot of problems, especially in rural areas (UNESCO, 2021).

Even if steps have been taken to make ECE more available, many children in rural Malawi still face a lot of problems. These include inadequate roads, insufficient professional caretakers, and social and economic problems that make it hard for children to get an early education (World Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). These problems have a big impact on how children learn, make friends, and feel when they can not get ECE services in rural areas. Without early education, children are less likely to learn how to think critically and solve problems, which they need to do well in primary school and beyond (Bakken et al., 2017).

Importance and aim of the Article

The research on ECE in Malawi has pinpointed socio-economic obstacles that impede access to quality programs, especially for children in remote areas such as T/A Kapeni. The research sought to mitigate these obstacles and implement targeted interventions to enhance educational outcomes for all children, irrespective of their geographical location. The study also aimed to enhance policy implementation by offering evidence-based recommendations derived from the actual experiences and requirements of impacted communities.

The long-term benefit was considerable because it boosted educational performance by acknowledging the value of ECE and making the environment more welcoming and fairer. Community involvement was key to solving ECE problems, which led to better outcomes and a fairer society.

Objective of the research

The main Objective

- To evaluate the socio-economic factors hindering access to ECE in T/A Kapeni.

Specific Objectives

- To evaluate the infrastructural challenges that hinder the provision of ECE in T/A Kapeni.
- To investigate the role of community and parental involvement in enhancing access to ECE
- To identify and recommend potential policy and practical interventions that can improve access to ECE in T/A Kapeni

Scope of the discussion

The study involved a thorough analysis of the socio-economic factors influencing access to ECE in T/A Kapeni. The study conducted a comprehensive examination of the factors affecting ECE accessibility, concentrating on targeted objectives that tackled infrastructure issues, community and family engagement, and prospective legislative and practical measures.

The study concentrated on T/A Kapeni in Blantyre District of Malawi. This place was chosen because it has distinct social and economic traits. Some of the people that were involved were parents, officials from Non-Governmental Organisations, and lawmakers. The mixed-methods research strategy, which included both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, helped to understand the problems that make it hard to access ECE services.

As part of the data collection procedure, 36 parents of children aged 3 to 5 were interviewed, together with officials from the Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare and the Malawi Association of ECE. In addition, three Focus Group Discussions were held with parents of children aged 3 to 5. The study's limitations include its sample size, geographic scope, and lack of direct children participation. Even so, it gives a starting point for future observations and suggests targeted efforts to make ECE more accessible to everyone.

2. Review of the Literature

Numerous studies have shown that ECE is very important for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. But unequal access is still a huge concern, especially in rural and low-income communities.

Studies show that the number of ECE centers has a big effect on how easy it is to get to them. The International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy (2023) said that ECE is very different in different parts of the world. This is especially true in low- and middle-income nations, where rural areas typically do not have enough infrastructure. Bertram and Pascal (2019) emphasized that equitable distribution of ECE institutions and strong legal frameworks are essential for enhancing both accessibility and quality.

The cost is another huge problem. The International Journal of Community Well-Being (2023) indicated that only 14% of children could afford ECE. The White House Council of Economic Advisers (2023) and UNESCO (2023) both indicated that ECE needs more public money and better policy coordination to be more affordable.

Inclusion is still a very important issue. The International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (2023) found that children with impairments do far better in inclusive ECE programs. ActionAid Malawi (2021) noted that cultural biases and a lack of understanding limit inclusive practices in rural Malawi, making it necessary to connect with the community and push for change.

People have also talked a lot about the trade-off between quality and access. A study in The Gambia showed that adding more ECE facilities without keeping the same level of quality can lead to worse developmental outcomes. This highlights how crucial it is to develop strategies that are both effective and reach a lot of people.

In Malawi, there are huge challenges with infrastructure, untrained caregivers, and social and economic issues. ActionAid Malawi (2021) and Phiri (2021) stressed how rural communities lack schools, bathrooms, and other educational materials. Mvula (2016) identified financial stress and parental disengagement as major obstacles; however, his research did not investigate the emotional consequences and the effectiveness of measures.

Cultural difficulties make it extra tougher to get there. Hand and Baxter (2022) emphasized the significance of cultural competence in ECE programs. Gondwe and Samarpana (2024) noted that community networks should be used to influence people's minds and get more people involved. Training for caregivers is another key topic. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2023) discovered that structural issues including not having enough money and unpleasant working conditions made it hard for professionals to do better. To keep the staff steady and give good service, they need to be trained regularly and paid more.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded on five interrelated theories that collectively elucidate the challenges preventing individuals in T/A Kapeni from accessing ECE.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner)

This theory posits that children development is shaped by interrelated environmental systems, encompassing intimate relationships (microsystem), expansive societal frameworks (macrosystem), and historical shifts (chronosystem). In T/A Kapeni, parental attitudes, infrastructure, and national policy collectively influence access to ECE (Banda et al., 2025; National Planning Commission, 2021).

Von Bertalanffy's Theory of Systems

System Theory views ECE as an integrated system encompassing families, Community Based Child Care's (CBCCs), communities, and governmental entities. It highlights how important it is to work together and warns that difficulties in any area, such centers that do not get enough money or communities that are not active, can harm the overall system.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Vygotsky et al.)

CHAT looks at how people's cultural beliefs and past experiences affect how they feel about early education. In rural Malawi, parents' decisions on whether or not to send their children to ECE are influenced by community norms and traditions. This means that interventions need to be culturally appropriate.

Coleman's Social Capital Theory

This hypothesis demonstrates the significance of relationships, networks, and community involvement in enhancing educational achievement. Strong social ties help families access resources, share information, and deal with the practical challenges that restrict them from taking part in ECE.

The Human Capital Theory by Becker and Schultz

Human Capital Theory says that investing in early education will pay off in the long term. ECE teaches children essential skills that make them more productive, cut the poverty rate, and help communities grow. The theory supports increased funding for infrastructure, training, and equitable access.

These frameworks work together to help in understanding the many diverse barriers to ECE access and come up with long-lasting, strategic, and inclusive solutions.

3. Discussion

This chapter discusses what parents in T/A Kapeni and other Stakeholders interviewed reported about the social, economic, and cultural aspects that affect access to ECE. The analysis, derived from interviews and group discussions, delineates hurdles such as poverty, food insecurity, distance, infrastructure deficiencies, and caregiver availability. These findings inform policy and practice, forming the basis for the recommendations.

Respondents' Demographics

Demographic data offers a holistic view of the lived experiences of individuals and groups, facilitating a more profound comprehension of study outcomes.

Majority of the respondents interviewed, 33%, were between the ages of 20 and 29. 28% of the people were between the ages of 30 and 39, and 22% were between the ages of 40 and 49. Only 3% of the people were younger than 20 years, while 14% were older than 50 years. During the research period, each parent had one child enrolled in preprimary school, which shows how hard it is to pay for and arrange for children to go to ECE centers or CBCCs.

The levels of schooling were not too high. Of the parents who were asked, 64% finished secondary school, 33% finished primary school, and one parent had no formal schooling. No persons held tertiary qualifications. Gender dynamics had an effect on involvement. Out of the 36 people who answered, 67% were women and 33% were men. Mothers were more likely to be involved in school-related activities, whereas fathers focused on making money.

According to employment patterns, 69% of parents worked piecework, which is short-term, informal work. 17% ran small enterprises, and 14% worked on farms. The economic instability of these professions directly affects a family's ability to pay for school-related costs and keep their children in school.

Socioeconomic Barriers to ECE

The research originally examined enrollment trends among the children of the sampled parents to understand ECE accessibility throughout the study population. Parents reported whether their children, aged 3 to 5 years, were enrolled in a local ECE program. Attendance patterns along with enrollment was considered to find out factors that encouraged or discouraged involvement. The data showed that some children had left ECE, but most of them still went to school. The study also looked into how often enrolled children went to class each week. The graph below shows how attendance is spread out.

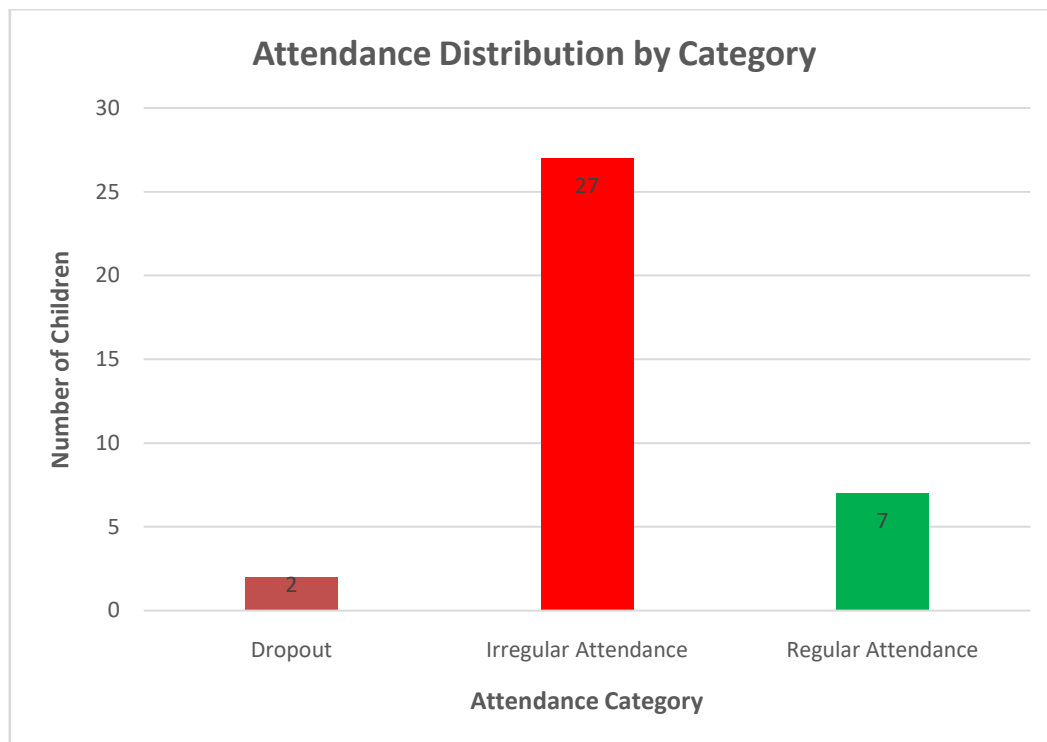


Figure 1: A breakdown of ECE attendance by children

Figure 1 shows three forms of attendance for ECE children in T/A Kapeni: regular, irregular, and dropout. Only two children dropped out, which is a small part of the sample. This shows that dropping out is not the main reason why children can not access ECE; instead, it is not showing up regularly.

The most common pattern was irregular attendance, with 27 of the 36 children (75%) not showing up regularly. Inconsistent attendance is caused by a number of things, like long travel distances, financial problems, and parents not understanding how important ECE is.

Seven children (19%) attended consistently. These families generally had more stable incomes, fewer family responsibilities, and lived close to ECE centers. Consistent attendance was associated with strong parental commitment and understanding of the long-term benefits of early education.

The data showed that even while many children did not attend consistently, just a few of them attended consistently to benefit from it. To improve retention and effectiveness, socioeconomic and logistical barriers such as poverty, poor infrastructure, and a lack of caregiver support needed to be addressed.

To understand these attendance trends, it required looking at the bigger picture. Economic instability, geographical inaccessibility, and cultural attitudes were not only responsible for irregular attendance; they constituted persistent barriers to ECE availability in T/A Kapeni. The next portion looks at how household circumstances, infrastructure, and parental attitudes affected how much children participated in early learning programs.

Economic hardships and food insecurity

Accessing ECE services in T/A Kapeni is quite hard because of money problems. Most parents rely on piecework or tiny enterprises that are not reliable and do not pay well, as seen in the demography section. These casual occupations make it impossible to pay for essential school supplies like soap, snacks, pencils, and transportation, especially for families who live at a distance from ECE centers.

Even though CBCCs or ECE centers are legally free, many ask for small donations, both in cash and in kind, to help pay for things like cleaning classrooms and bathrooms and buying firewood or cornmeal to make porridge. These prices are not very high, but they are hard for families that are already having a hard time. Some parents put off enrolling their children, borrow money, or sell farm commodities to pay for these things, which typically makes their money troubles worse. Of the parents who were interviewed, 25% had two children who were eligible to enroll in early learning programs. Because of money problems, only one of the two eligible children could be enrolled. It was too expensive. Parents said they would wait for their older child to finish ECE before signing up their younger child. This means, the younger child misses out on important early learning opportunities.

Food deprivation makes it harder to access ECE services in T/A Kapeni. Many people see ECE centers as places where children can eat and learn, especially in homes where breakfast is not customary. The results showed that parents took their hungry children to the center or CBCCs in the expectation that they would have porridge to eat to get them through the day. This decides whether or not the children will come, and when porridge is not accessible, especially during other seasons when food is hard to find, they do not come as much.

Some centers obtain flour from NGOs, but they do not always get it. Local groups ask households to pay a little bit of money every month to make up for the shortage. This technique doesn't function in houses when people can not help out. Porridge is not offered every day because of this. When children are hungry, they miss school or have difficulties focusing. Hunger affects learning, managing emotions, and getting along with others. Children are less likely to learn or remember things if they do not eat. It is apparent that nutrition influences attendance: children arrive when there is porridge and stay home when there is not.

Geographical barrier to ECE

Physical accessibility also affects how easily T/A Kape children can get to ECE. The distance from children's homes to the nearest ECE center has an effect on how often they go to school. The study showed that the distance and time it took for children to get to the nearest ECE center had a big effect on how easy it was for them to use the program. Families lived an average of 2.39 km from the nearest center, and the travels there normally took between 27 and 32 minutes. This was a major daily hardship for a lot of individuals, especially those who had to walk.

The shortest distance reported was 0.8 km, which took 10 minutes to walk. The longest distance reported was 3.6 km, which took 41 minutes to walk, often over tough ground. These extremes indicated that not all residences had the same level of access.

Summary statistics showed some changes, but not all of them. A scatter plot was used to look at the relationship between distance and travel time. The plot showed that geography and transportation availability had a big impact on accessibility. Families without motorcycles or safe paths had a difficult time.

The results showed that getting to ECE services in person was quite different from one place to another. To attract more children to sign up and show up, it requires more than just being close by. It also took making sure that the trip was safe, simple, and of high quality for both the children and their caretakers.

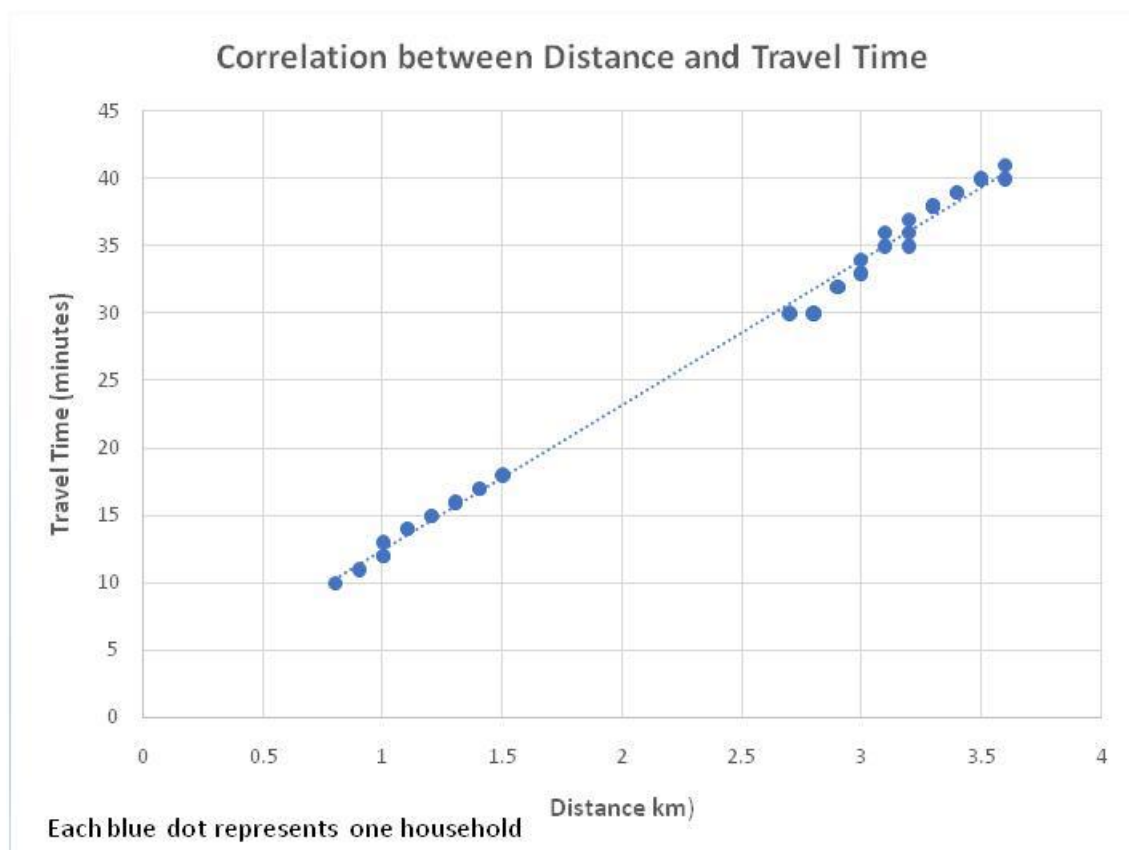


Figure 2: link between household distance from ECE centers and accompanying journey time

The scatter plot above shows how far away ECE centers were from homes (in kilometers) and how long it took to get there (in minutes). Each dot stood for a household, and it showed that as the distance grew, so did the time it took to get there. For instance, families who lived 3.5 to 3.6 km away commonly said it took them 40 minutes or more to get there, whereas those who lived nearby usually got there in less than 20 minutes.

But the plot also showed inconsistency. Some households at equal distances said they took varying amounts of time to get there. For example, two families 3.2 kilometers distant took 35 and 37 minutes, respectively. This meant that the terrain, road conditions, availability of transportation, and safety issues also had an effect on trip time.

These results demonstrated that physical access was not just about how far away it was; it was also about how good the trip was. Long, hard excursions wore out small children and made things harder for parents, especially those who didn't have reliable transportation or had to work.

Beyond the Classroom: T/A Kapeni's Real ECE Barrier

In T/A Kapeni, access to ECE means more than just signing up. It also means making sure that learning spaces are secure, welcoming, and respectful. The study discovered that even while there are centers, but their conditions were not good. Infrastructure difficulties were both common and bad. Respondents picked more than one infrastructure problem during data collection, which highlighted how complicated these problems are. 100% reported absence of secure storage or handwashing facilities, and 94% said children were sitting on cold, bare floors without mats. 97% reported overcrowding in classes, and 83% said there was only one pit toilet for children and adults. These situations put children's health and safety at risk every day, which hurts their learning and health.

Another problem was that accessibility and inclusivity got worse. Only 36% of centers had ramps or facilities that were accessible to everyone, and 19% aided children with sensory issues. These data reflect a system that mistakenly leaves out the most at-risk children.

Additionally, there were insufficient learning materials at the centers. Parents said that the centers did not provide enough storybooks, puzzles, and charts. Teachers showed creativity by using local materials to make learning tools, but their work was not good enough. Because these delicate tools were not stored properly, they often got lost or broken, which made teaching outcomes uncertain and made parents less likely to send their children to class.

Teacher capacity was also one of the big hindrance. Caregivers lacked professional skills, in teaching children with disabilities. Parents were worried that their children with asthma or mobility problems would not get enough attention. One parent commented, *"When it is cold or dusty, I keep my child with asthma at home. I can not risk sending him to a facility where the teacher doesn't know how to deal with him."*

Absenteeism among teachers made things worse. During the growing season, a lot of teachers preferred to labor in their fields instead of teaching. Parents said they had to walk a long way to find closed centers. One parent said, *"I walked 25 minutes in the rain with my child, only to find the center closed." No one told us that the teacher wouldn't be there."*

These statistics indicate that ECE in T/A Kapeni is unsuccessful due to an unprepared system, rather than a lack of concern from families. Real access goes beyond just buildings. It needs teachers who are qualified, places that are safe and well-equipped, and design that is open to everyone. Without these foundations, early education will not be offered to the most at-risk children.

Involvement of parents

Parents in T/A Kapeni, on the other hand, care a lot about ECE and know how important it is. Some ways that parents became involved were by cleaning the center's outside, washing the utensils, going to meetings, volunteering, and helping their children with schoolwork at home. Even yet, many parents had trouble getting involved because of piecemeal schedules and uncertain duties. The survey also showed that there was a big difference between what people thought and what they did. For example, some parents did not know that going to meetings or helping with duties was helpful. Still, seeing their children grow up to be more polite, interested, and sure of themselves made them want to get active.

Needs for support in the home

People were asked the kind of help they needed to access ECE. The most common requests were for free porridge, transportation, hygiene supplies, toys and playgrounds, and training for caregivers. Key people from Malawi's Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare (MOGSW) and the Association of Early Childhood Development in Malawi (AECMD) backed these aims, showing that they all agree on what needs to be done. Both groups said that not having enough food, trained caregivers, and fun play materials makes it harder for children to sign up and come to school. Household voices and institutional perspectives converge, endorsing targeted, multi-tiered actions.

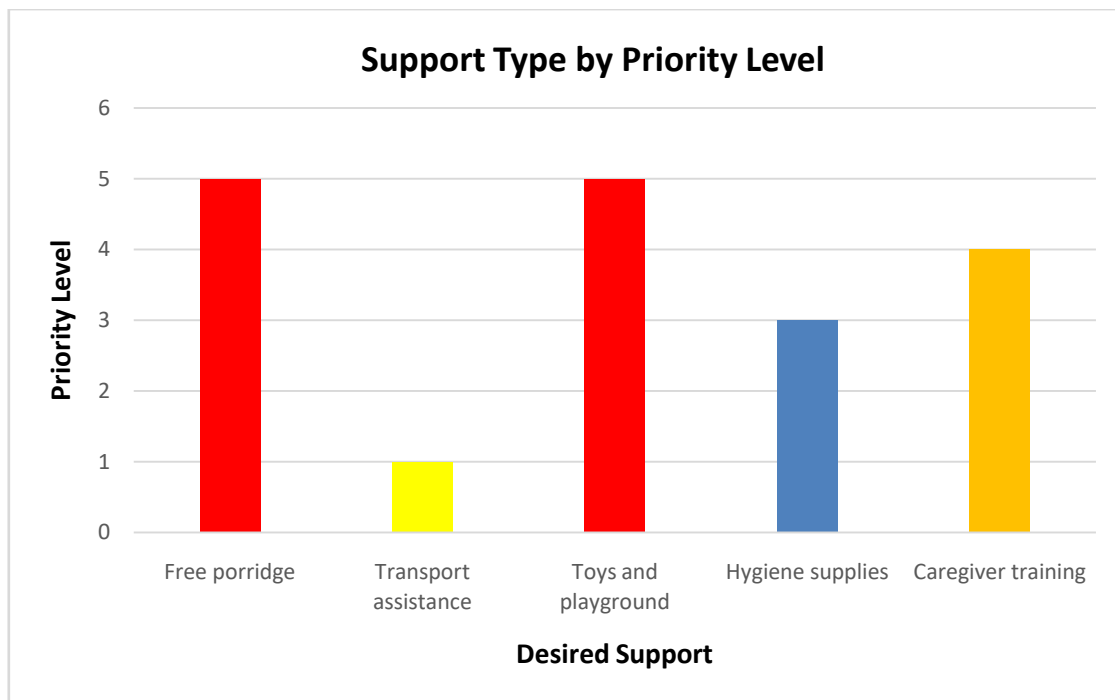


Figure 3. support needs thought to be the most important for getting significant ECE access

Families ranked their assistance needs in order of significance, from 1 (low) to 5 (high), with free porridge being the most significant. Parents believed that feeding programs were essential for both nutrition and school attendance. They also agreed that having toys and training for caregivers were vital for getting children involved and making sure they were safe. Hygiene supplies and transportation are also key hurdles, albeit they are rated a little lower. These ratings demonstrate what individuals really go through and present a clear plan for making ECE easier to access through planning around on what the community requires.

Interviews with key informants from the MOGSW and AECDM indicated structural difficulties such as funding, infrastructure, and personnel that they believe continue to limit ECE delivery in T/A Kapeni. At the same time, they pointed out that private investment could make things better in public-private partnerships. Parents stressed the importance of being open and recognizing small contributions to encourage ownership and involvement. The results show that institutional reform, working together, community leadership, and implementing policies that are specific to the area are all important for making ECE more accessible.

4. Observations and Important Insights

The study's findings indicated that access to ECE in T/A Kapeni is influenced by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, infrastructural, and institutional factors. Financial difficulties became a major problem because families had trouble getting important things like soap, snacks, and transportation. The limits are made worse by the government's lack of investment in ECE, which forces communities to rely on informal donations and volunteer work, which puts a lot of stress on low-income families. The study showed how important feeding programs are, with porridge being a key factor in attendance. This shows how nutrition and education are connected, since hunger hurts health and makes it harder to participate in school.

It also showed that parents lose faith in schools when they have problems with their buildings, like cracked floors, leaking roofs, and too many children in one room. This also makes places where people learn less safe and respectful. Teachers not being there, especially during planting and harvesting seasons, together with caretakers not getting official training, makes it hard to provide continuous service and lowers the quality of instruction. The study showed that the community was very strong and willing to help, even when there were problems. Communities may make big changes when they are given power and recognition.

For example, school-based agriculture, strengthening traditional leadership, and getting parents involved in committees are all examples of this. But these initiatives probably cannot continue or grow since not enough people know the rules and there aren't enough ways to keep an eye on them. The results show that making ECE more accessible involves both investment in infrastructure and governance that includes everyone, policies that are responsive, and activities that are conscious of different cultures.

5. Final Thoughts and Suggestions

In short, the study found that familial, community, and institutional barriers all work together to make it harder for people in T/A Kapeni to access ECE. Major problems include not having enough money, not having enough food, having to travel long distances, having bad infrastructure, and not

having enough skilled caregivers. Parents value ECE and know that it helps children grow and learn, but they often can not get involved because they do not know what their job is, they do not get enough acknowledgment, and the system does not care about them. Community-driven activities, like giving schools land for farming and strengthening traditional leadership, show that people in the area are strong; yet, they do not work as well without government support, inclusive governance, and long-term investment. Institutional stakeholders interviewed brought up these issues, saying that lack of financing, poor monitoring mechanisms, and policies that do not match up are all big barriers to providing fair ECE.

To solve the problems that have been mentioned, policy, community, and institutional levels need to work together. At the policy level, it is important to increase government financing, systematically recruit and train caregivers, and include school feeding in national ECE programs. Communities should be given more influence by having parental committees that include everyone, recognizing contributions, and helping local farming projects. Institutions need to put money into safe, child-centered infrastructure, use digital technology to make monitoring systems better, and encourage cooperation between the public and private sectors to get more resources and new ideas. These ideas provide a useful basis for building fair, strong, and community-centered ECE systems in T/A Kapeni and other rural areas.

Future research should investigate underexplored domains, including gender roles in caregiving and decision-making, the distinct obstacles encountered by children with disabilities, and the comparative dynamics of ECE in rural vs urban contexts. Research must evaluate the enduring efficacy and scalability of community-driven solutions, encompassing agricultural support to centers and the enhancement of traditional leadership. This study is crucial for formulating inclusive, contextually relevant policies that guarantee every child the opportunity to flourish.

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