

Towards Ensuring Holistic Child Development In Early Childhood Education In Nigeria

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Abstract: *Holistic development is a key component in Early Childhood Education. However, this area is often not adequately catered for in the education of children. This paper therefore explored the viable roles of Early Childhood Education for ensuring holistic child development in Nigeria. It reviewed conceptual issues around Early Childhood Education and explored the purpose of Early Childhood Education. It further analyzed the roles of early childhood educators and schools in total child development. It equally conceptualized holistic development and examined the importance and principles of holistic education as well as the impact of early childhood care and education on total child development. The paper suggested that teachers should ensure judicious use of available school activities and academic tools for enhancing the holistic development of the children in Early Childhood Education in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Early childhood educators, Holistic education, Holistic development, Nigeria

Introduction

An important concept for early childhood educators is that of the "total child". The field of early care and education often uses the phrase "the total child" to describe the idea that children's development across the domains is both simultaneously and overlapping Berk (2008). This implies that human development occurs simultaneously and each area of development in turn affects other areas of development. These interactions among areas of development contribute to the uniqueness of individuals.

Miller (2008) leading proponent of holistic education defined total child education as an effort to cultivate the development of the whole human being. Where conventional schooling traditionally reflects the view of the child as a passive receiver of information and rules, or at most a computer like processor of information. A total child approach recognizes that to become a full person, a growing child needs to develop in addition to intellectual skills physical, emotional, psychological, interpersonal, moral and spirited potentials. Miller (2005,2008) emphasized that total child approach helps individuals to live more consciously within their communities and natural ecosystem. More recently educational psychologist has proposed that total child education is aimed at helping children to be most they can be or what Maslow (1954) referred to as 'self-actualization'. Some pioneers in the field of education such as Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner among others all insisted that education should be understood as the art of cultivating the moral, emotional, physical, psychological and spirited dimensions of the developing child. The commission on the whole child (2007) believe that the total child is intellectually active, physical, verbally, socially and academically competent. He is empathetic, kind, caring and fair. He is creative, curious, disciplined, self-directed, goal oriented, free, a critical thinker, confident, cared for and valued.

Human develop in stages and in variety of domains cognitive, physical, emotional, social and moral. Each domain develops in the context of all others and cannot be separated. Each affects the others in important ways, Development in the multiple, interacting domains can be viewed as passing through specific stage, with transitions to each new stage being influenced by, or contingent upon, accomplishment attained in previous stages. Just as children's language or mental capabilities develop as a result of maturation and experiences so too do children's development in other domains. Development in the multiple domains varies somewhat for each child, and is affected by both internal (biological predisposition, within child abilities) and external (physical and social environment) influence (Brett, Smith, Pric, & Huitt, 2003). Berk (2008) insisted that developmental domains are interrelated, that is development in one domain influences and is influenced by development in other domains. Teachers adopting total child approach can recognize children's learning experience in ways that help to develop optimally in all areas that make meaningful connections across domains (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). When development is portrayed holistically a more realistic picture of the vibrancy of the total child is created. It is against this backdrop that this paper explores Early Childhood Education for ensuring holistic child development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Issues

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to education and care giving to a child from age 0 year to 8 years old. This age range is considered a time of significant growth and development, with the brain reaching its peak in terms of development. During this time, children are highly influenced by their environment and the people around them. There are numerous definitions of Early Childhood Education, with some definitions focusing on the activities and experiences that are designed to support children's development before entering primary school. It is also defined as education that is meant to challenge and inspire children from three to five years age range to become active, motivated, and purposeful learners who are pry about the world around them.

Currently, the age range for early childhood has been expanded to include children up to eight years old. International Organisation such as the Organisation Mondiale pour L'Education pre-scolaire (OMEP), the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have all adopted this broader definition of Early Childhood Education.

Early Childhood Education is an all-encompassing aspect of education that aims to support the holistic development of a child. This comprises intellectual, physical, language, social, emotional, moral, and cultural development (Okewole, 2012). Karoly (2012) explained that children gain variety of experiences in the course of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth and developmental changes. He pointed out that "human life proceeds by stages that are influenced by variety of factors such as heredity, family, biological, economic and political institution and critical life issues". To early childhood period is generally referred to as the period from birth till about the age of five or six. In other words, it is the period before the official primary school age in Nigeria. Ibiam and Ugwu (2011), explained that support and care received by a child in terms of good health, nutrition, psychological care and protection are crucial in the information and development of intelligence, personality and social behaviour.

The knowledge of the childhood developmental stages is of immense value to the planning of any childhood programme. Ibiam and Ugwu (2011), sees child development as the biological, psychological and emotional changes that occur in human beings between birth and the end of adolescence, according to him, he believed that individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy. These developmental changes may be strongly influenced by genetic factors and events during prenatal life. According to Onibokun, Okoye and Alao (1985), human beings have a sense to adapt to their surroundings, and this is what child development encompasses. The optimal development of children is considered by Karoly (2012) as vital to society and so it is important to understand the social, cognitive, emotional, and educational development of children. The idea of Early Childhood Education has been with mankind from the beginning of human existence. Ibiam and Ugwu (2011) opined that it is the foundation upon which the success or failure of other levels of education depends. This is predicated on many studies of children which revealed the importance of early years in physical, social, Intellectual and emotional development. It is the first formal education children receive under the auspices of the teacher; the rest of the education system is built upon the Early Childhood Education; any defect at this stage could go a long way in affecting the later intellectual ability of the child. On contrary, any stimulation at this critical period will greatly influence the child's success in life. Besides, the quality of inputs into primary school is determined at this stage.

Children, at this level have wonderful impressionable minds and these minds need to be well nurtured and developed from this early stage for future adjustment. Neuman (2023) emphasized that children have a number of survival needs to contend within their new environment (school), such as protection from extreme cold or heat which require good building and other facilities. He explained further that they need balanced diet which is to enable them to be healthy and resist diseases.

Early childhood education programme is basically divided into three age categories. It includes the crèche, the nursery and kindergarten (National Policy on Education 2004). The first age category which is Day care or Creche includes infants and toddlers who are between the ages of birth and 3 years. According to Bredekamp (2017), the most important factor for young infants is security with primary caregivers. Between the ages of 9 to 18 months, mobile infants are mostly concerned with exploration and between 18 and 36 months, the central focus of development is identity, and children become more independent. The second age category of Early Childhood Education includes Nursery who is 4 to 5 years of age. Bredekamp (2017) believed this period of development is characterized by rapid gross motor development (example jumping, hopping, skipping), refined movement of small muscles for object manipulation, major increases in vocabulary and use of language, abstract representation of mental constructs, and the developmental of relationships with other young children.

The final category is to kindergarten which includes those children in the age range between 5 and 6 years of age, though in the Nigeria Education system, the kindergarten comes before the Nursery. Bredekamp further described this level as a stage of gross and fine motor development. Characterized by children's ability to perform controlled movements and sequence motor skills. Greater reasoning, problem solving, and assimilation also characterize children's cognitive development at this stage. Kolawole (2019) observed that during the kindergarten years, children's vocabulary increases at a rapid pace. In addition, their written communication skills develop. Socially, the children begin to understand others perspectives, are concerned with fairness, and monitor their own behaviour. In Nigeria, ECE came being in order to assist and bring early child. National Child Welfare Policy (1989) said that a child is anybody who is 12 years or below. But this has been modified a little recently. Thus, a child in Nigeria is now considered to be anybody below the age of 18 years. This appears to accept the United Nations age definition of a child. The Nigerian law also regards anybody below the age of 18 years as a child (minor). In other words, anybody below the age of 18 years in Nigeria cannot vote or be voted for reason that he/ she is still a child.

Akinbote (2001) explained that the practice of Early Childhood Education did not start today. A comparative history of various political, cultural and economic events that marked world history and which has heavily influenced the adoption of various approaches to Early Childhood Education is important for appreciation and assessment of its implementation in the present time. The concept of Early Childhood Education started from need to educate the child from birth, no matter how informal, this concept dates back to pre-colonial era in Nigeria. In effect, pre-school education has always existed in Nigeria even before the advent of western civilization and formal education practice. According to Anderson (2009), the method of instruction like that of traditional system of education consisted of role –playing, discovery, observation and imitation, storytelling, learning by doing, and so on.

Before the advent of Western education in the country, Nigerians had their own educational practices and systems aimed at bringing up their younger ones in the way of life of the people. Anderson (2009) opined that educational system was such that the children acquired skills, knowledge, patterns of thought and attitudes which the communities recommended for effective living. Training childhood includes toilet, health and meal habits. The child was also taught respect for elders and simple gestures while exchanging greetings. The child learns hospitality through friendliness and the need to accommodate people. Specifically, the mother plays the role of a teacher in the intellectual, social and emotional development of the child.

The Purpose of Early Childhood Education

Pre-primary education refers to the education given to children between the age of three and five years plus in an educational institution prior they enter primary schools. That is, such a place must be approved by the government as a place for the education of children between age three and five. There are numerous of such establishments in both urban and semi-urban towns in Nigeria. There are numerous people who may not really know why children need pre-primary education. However, there are many people who do not send their children to nursery schools at all. Some do not send their children because they cannot pay the high fees charged in the schools. There are others who do not send their children to nursery schools as a result of ignorance. In other words, there are many people who even send their children to the nursery schools without knowing the benefits their children can derive from school.

There are also who felt that since has ‘made it’ without nursery school education, it is a luxury to send children there. It now appears that people are becoming more interested in the education to their children, even at this pre-school level Most parents particularly those who are illiterates want their children to better than themselves hence they send their children to the nursery schools. It is now a popular thing throughout the modern world to send children to nursery schools when they are not old enough to start primary education. The pre-school establishments have therefore been recognized all over the world as good place for the children prior they start primary education.

In modern societies, married women are now taking up paid employment to augment family economy. This means that they are no longer full-time housewives whose main duty is to take care of the family. Aside this, as you are already aware, the African extended family system whereby there are always people at home to look after the children is slowly giving way. Furthermore, house helps where available are now exorbitant. Even some of the house helps have become security risks hence many people do not like to have them again. Hence, in order to ensure safety and adequate care of the children while their parents are at work, the nursery school is essential. When children are left in the nursery school, the parents can have peace of mind and be sure that their children are not only safe, but also under the care of experts. Hence, for security reasons, the nursery school is a perfect place to keep the children when their parents are away at work.

Another crucial reason for having the nursery school for children is the fact that it provides children perfect environment for socialization. There is no home, but wealthy that can provide the type of environment which nursery schools provide for the proper education of children. For instance, no home can have as twenty or more children of the same age group. There is also no home that can provide the different experts in education as well as the live experiences, which the school can provide. Hence, since children need a good environment for their proper social and emotional development, it has become necessary for parents to keep their children in the nursery schools.

As opined by Akinbote (2001), the ability of a child to realize his potentials depends on the type of stimulation and encouragement the child receives from home. Besides, as a result of the socio-economic problems in Nigeria for instance, numerous parents can no longer provide their children the essence stimulation which they need for their all-round development. Hence, in order to prevent anything that will reduce or prevent the child’s rate of maturation and high level of achievement, the nursery school is essential for the child. In the nursery school the child will receive the essential opportunities which are not available at home. There are also some children with some problems, which the parents may not actually notice or identify in their children early. The problems could be physical such as bad sight or hearing problems. It could also be emotional problems such as fears, restlessness, etc. The various experts in the nursery schools could help to detect such early and advice the parents on how to correct them. There are numerous

examples of such problems that should be corrected prior they get out of hand. Hence, in order to provide children with the necessary security and care while their parents are away at work, we need the nursery schools.

Besides, for proper emotional, social, physical and intellectual development of children, the nursery school is a must for all children in modern societies. In reality experts in the field of Early Childhood Education as well as brain development have emphasized that the period between 0 and 5 years is critical for all the areas of development that we have mentioned earlier including personality and character development. It is further pointed out that it might be difficult to put things right in children if proper care is not given at this period of development. We can never neglect or ignore this level of education. As we mentioned initially, the importance of pre-primary/ nursery education for the well-being of the child has been recognized all over the world. In Nigeria, government has realized the importance of pre-primary education. Therefore, it has stated the purpose of this level of education in the National Policy on Education (2014) are to: have a smooth transition from home to school; prepare the child for the primary level of education; provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (in the markets, on the farms, offices and so on); inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys; inculcate social norms; develop a sense of cooperation and team-spirit; learn good habits, especially good health habits; and teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, shapes, colours, forms through play.

Roles of Early Childhood Educators in Total Child Development

The role of the teacher is important in a child's life. Children depend on teachers to be their confidant, colleague, model, instructor, and nurturer of educational experience (Wardle, 2008). Early childhood educators who understand the concept of the whole child takes steps to provide multiple sources of stimulation to encourage the development of physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills (Wardle, 2008).

Hale (1994) asserted that children learn most effectively through total physical involvement and require a high level of physical activity, variety, and stimulus change. Teachers should create opportunities for concrete, hands-on activities. Young children need hands-on activities: playing in water, building mud pies, making things out of wood, putting a doll to bed, etc. They also need lots of ways to practice and integrate new experiences into existing mental structures: dramatic play, drawing, talking photographs, using language and making things with blocks (Wardle, 2008). Center for Child Development – CCD (2007) asserted that teachers are trained to have direct conversations with children and make daily activities meaningful through the incorporation of children's experiences into the curriculum. They also emphasize that the classroom environment should be nurturing, supportive and successful for all children. To help make this true for children, teachers may need to make various adaptations to the classroom environment. Teacher ensures that classrooms often are divided into different learning centres and are equipped with developmentally appropriate materials for young children to play with and manipulate.

Farquhar (2003) stated that given the young age of children and the particular complexity of teaching this age group, teacher education (including knowledge and pedagogical skills) and the teacher's personal characteristics matter. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child - NSCDC (2004) in their findings concluded that early childhood educators must make it a high priority to develop warm and supportive relationships with children because secured relationship with caregivers have been found to have positive outcomes for children in areas such as social competence, behavioural problems, enhance thinking and reasoning skills. They also submit that carers play important role in helping children to develop and sustain friendships which also support social competence and impulse control. According to National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) positive relationship with teachers are nurturing and stimulating, allowing the child to feel safe and confident which promotes exploration and learning. In agreement with the above submissions, it clear that childhood teachers have crucial roles to play in the development of the total child.

Roles of Schools in Total Child Development

An early childhood environment is a safe place where children are protected and are easily supervised, and it's where the important activities of the day take place, such as playing, sleeping, eating, washing hands, and going to the bathroom (Wardle 2008). Beyond the basics, however, an environment for young children should implement and supports total child development. It is imperative that school play their roles to ensure that children develop holistically. School should provide early childhood environments that are rich in experience where children can explore, experiment, and learn basic knowledge through direct experience (Greenman, 1988). School should also create environment that is rich in play. Play provides a way for children to integrate all their new experiences into their rapidly developing minds, bodies, emotions, and social skills. Brain research supports this idea, stressing that children learn best through an integrated approach combining physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth (Shore, 1997). Since the role of the teacher is critical in a child's life children, therefore schools should ensure that the teachers in their institutions are individuals with capacity to become the children's confidant, colleague, model, instructor, and nurturer of educational experiences.

Research and programme experience shows that improving nutrition and health can lead to better performance, fewer repeated grades and reduced drop out (Rosso, 1999). There is evidence that school feeding programmes established by school alleviate short term hunger, motivate parents to enroll children in schools, address specific micro-nutrient deficiency and improves community participation in school activities (Simeon & Grantham-McGregor, 1989; Meyers, 1989; Jacoby & Cueto, 1995).

Conceptualizing Holistic Development

Children develop holistically. They need support to be healthy, to have good nutrition, encouragement, protection, and learning. Childhood is a critical phase of one's life. The resources, and nurturing one receives during this phase have a profound impact on their blossoming and becoming responsible and productive adults. Each child has its strengths, personality, and intrinsic talents. However, each child has its own nurturing needs. For these young minds to blossom into the best adults they can be, parents and schools will have to understand them thoroughly and meet their specialized needs so that holistic development of their physical, mind and emotional aspects is possible.

The holistic development in childhood includes: physical, social, cognitive, emotional, linguistic, spiritual and moral development from birth to age of 8 years old. The holistic development needs: health, nutrition, early stimulation, emotional interactions and positive social with the caregivers, learning opportunities, and protection against violence (Kristina, Veronika & Tahsin 2024).

Holistic development refers to the overall growth of an individual in multiple dimensions where physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual growth of a child is taken (Bhise, 2024). This style of education not only focuses on mere learning but also on implementing what is learnt. Holistic approach in an education means engaging and developing the whole person through education. Holistic approach helps to bring the development of the different levels for learners. It covers physical, emotional, cognitive, language and spiritual (Varun, 2024).

In its review, UNESCO (2017) stated that holistic development the development of a whole person, including physical, cognitive, emotional and language aspects, and recognizes the importance of cultural, social and environmental contexts. Gardner, (1999) also stated that holistic development involves the development of multiple intelligences, including linguistic verbal, intrapersonal, musical, interpersonal, logical- mathematical, visual spatial, bodily kinesthetic, existential and naturalistic intelligence.

However, Hart (2001) stated that holistic development involves the integration of spiritual, social, moral, physical, emotional, and intellectual development, and seeks to cultivate a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction in life. Lerner, (2002) Explained that holistic development is a dynamic and iterative process that integrates intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development, and recognizes the interconnectedness of individual and contextual factors. Furthermore, UNESCO (2002) stated that the significance of holistic approaches to education, early childhood educators are being challenged to integrate a teaching practice that focuses less on the traditional milestones of academic development, and more on the complete physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of a child.

Holistic development also refers to all areas of development in the young child, such as physical, moral, affectionate, cognitive, emotional and social development as well as language development, to help meet the demands and challenges of daily life (Lombard & Du Toit 2021). With holistic development, the focus is on the children's physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being and the understanding of the fact that all these are interconnected. However, the cognitive and intellectual aspects of learning are certainly not forgotten and the two work hand –in- hand.

The holistic approach means something considered in its entirety. Holistic approach helps to bring the development of the different levels for the learners. It is based on the widely accepted principles that all the human development areas are interrelated and their development occurs simultaneously through the development areas. Moreover, children differ from each other. Even though they share the same age, a certain development type might develop early in some children, while others may develop another type.

Importance and Principles of Holistic Education

Holistic development addresses the widest development of the whole person that is, physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social and aesthetic domains. It aims for the optimum possible human development enabling a person to become the very best or finest that they can be and develop fully those capacities that together make up a human being (Forbes, 2003). The importance of holistic development is not only to prepare pupils for academic success, but also enable them to learn the challenges of living as a whole that means learning about themselves, about healthy relationships, humanitarian values and social responsibilities. To ensure holistic development, an holistic education is not to be defined as a particular method or techniques, it must be seen as a paradigm, a set of basic assumptions and principles with some features that can be applied in schools in diverse ways. Some principles holistic education are as follows:

1. Educating for human development: Education is to nourish the inherent possibilities of human development. It focuses on optimum possible development of pupil's i.e physical, intellectual, social, emotional and aesthetic. It teaches children about themselves, about their relationships.
2. Based on child centric approach: Holistic education based on child centric approach. Pupil need to work at their own pace. Its emphasis on diverse learning style of ther pupils.
3. Central role of experience: It emphasized on use of real-life experiences. It gives importance on pupils' direct engagement with the environment.
4. Honoring pupils as individual: Each pupil is unique; they have individual needs and abilities. Holistic education is based on personal differences.
5. Freedom of choice: Pupils and parents should have opportunities for real choice at every stage of the learning process.
6. Educating for a participatory democracy: It should be based on democratic values and education should foster collaboration rather than competition among the pupils.
7. Teachers' resources: Teachers must be resourceful. They must be scholar and learned person.

Impact of Early Childhood Care and Education on Total Child Development

The positive impact of early childhood care and education on participation and achievement in primary school and beyond is well documented (Young, 2002; Arnold, 2004; Mustard, 2007; Young, 2007). Attendance in an early childhood care and education programme can enhance social and emotional development and wellbeing, language and basic cognitive skills development, physical and motor development (Young, 2007). Early childhood care and education can improve school readiness and nurture positive self-image and learning disposition. It makes enrollment in the first grade of primary education more likely and increases retention, completion and achievement. Strong evidence of the above is found in both developed and developing countries.

There is evidence of the longer –term efficacy of Early Childhood Education and care intervention, reaching into adolescence and young adulthood, comes from small-scale high-quality model programmes such as High scope Perry Preschool (Schweinhart et al 2005). These programmes primarily enroll socio-economically disadvantaged children who are manifestly behind in their development compared to more privileged children. In addition, these programmes generally use highly trained teachers and have low child-to-staff ratios in contrast to large public programmes. Hence, they are designed to highlight to positive effects of early education and care. In fact, it is well known that these model interventions have beneficial effects on the development of children (Barnett,1995). Early day care was found in Effective Provision of Pre- School Education (EPPE) to relate to increased cognitive outcomes better Independence and Peer Sociability at 5 years but also to increased anti-social behaviour. These findings are similar to those in the US and Northern Ireland (NICHD, 2002; Melhuish et al 2001,2002).

Furthermore, early childhood care and education can compensate for disadvantage and vulnerability regardless of underlying factors such as poverty gender, race or ethnicity, caste or religion (UNESCO,2006). Participation in an intensive early learning programme enabled poor children to obtain equal test scores as middle class children attending a traditional pre-school programme (Short, 1995 cited in Arnold, 2004). Arnold and Panday (2003) also found that early child care and education can enhance gender equality among young children as well as women and men. Early childhood care and education is therefore very essential in other to ensure total development of children, considering its role in improvement of school readiness nurturing positive, self-image, increase retention, completion and achievement of primary education and beyond.

Conclusion

The study concluded that assembly activities, break time activities, singing, reading, eating period, recitation, sport and physical exercise, dancing, debate and quiz, watching rhymes and songs, playing, excursion and storytelling are school activities for ensuring the holistic development of children in early childhood centres in Nigeria. The study finally concluded that social development, intellectual development, physical development, emotional development and health status should be used by the teachers for the development domains of the children in Early Childhood Education.

Suggestions

Based on the conclusion of findings of the study, it is hereby recommended that:

1. Teachers should ensure judicious use of available school activities for enhancing the holistic development of the children in Early Childhood Education programme.
2. Teachers should always make use of assessment tools for the development domains of the children.

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