

THE PROSPECTS AND CONSTRAINTS OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING IN FORMAL EDUCATION SETTINGS IN AKWA IBOM

BY

ATAKPA, ARIT OKONOBONG.
DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION,
AKWA IBOM STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
AFAHA NSIT.

&

INIBEHE EYO EKANEM
DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AND SPECIAL EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF UYO.

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the prospects and constraints of children's learning in formal education settings in Akwa Ibom. It establishes that the Federal Government of Nigeria in its National policy on Education has given official recognition to the development and provision of early childhood education in the country. It highlights the forces influencing learning in children and discussed the factors that enhance children to learn in pre-primary school. This combined with a number of factors to give rise to an unprecedented expansion in the provision of child care and early childhood education institutions in the country. It also identifies the inability of government among others to implement most of the measures it stated in the National Policy on Education and the constraints experienced in the system. It has also established that the provision of early childhood education will have positive influence on the educational development of children in later life.

Key words: Learning, constraints in learning, prospects, formal education, Akwa Ibom State

INTRODUCTION

Education is the vital instrument for social and economic mobility at the personal level and an instrument for transformation of society at the national level. Apart from home as the first agent of socialization, Pre-primary school is the foundation stage of schooling system. In other words, it is considered as the bedrock of other levels of education. In Nigeria context, the pre-primary education, as pronounced by the policy, is that phase which prepares the child for primary school. In other words, the phase prior to primary school is the area of focus.

Early childhood education is the crux of development for child and it is vital for the nation to take initiatives to ensure that children get appropriate education commensurate to their level of development. Theorising about the importance of early childhood education, Education International (EI) (2006, p.6) stated that: Early childhood is the most critical period for cognitive and social development, the acquisition of languages and early literacy. Children are active learners from birth, and the first years are vital. Early childhood education (ECE) should be recognized as a first step of basic education, as a fully integrated sector within national education

systems. Provision should be universally accessible and free for all children. High quality ECE provides the foundation for life-long learning and stimulates children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive and linguistic development.

There is no doubt that the pre-primary school system in Nigeria is facing serious problems which has affected the learning process of children. It is observed that in some schools, instructional materials needed to aid teaching-learning activities are not available. The teachers also are no longer committed to their jobs because they are not well paid. It is obvious that unless these teachers are provided with the drive that would energize them or the tools needed, their best could not be tapped or attained and the accomplishment of educational goals would be difficult.

Statement of the Problem

Over the last decade, Nigeria's exponential growth in population has put immense pressure on the country's resources and on already overstretched public services and infrastructure. The burden on education and other sectors has become overwhelming. Increased enrollment rates have also created challenges in ensuring quality education and satisfactory learning achievement as resources are spread more thinly across a growing number of students. The number of schools, facilities and teachers available for basic education remain inadequate for the eligible number of children. This is more so in urban areas where there is population pressure. Under these conditions, teaching and learning cannot be effective; hence the outcomes are usually below expectation. In light of the above, this study seeks to examine the prospects and constraints of children's learning in formal education settings in Akwa Ibom.

Literature Review

Forces Influencing Learning in Children

Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Komulainen and Entwistle (2013) advance four approaches that influence learning among children in pre-primary or early childhood education. I want to state that some of the approaches were mentioned by the previous scholars, however, it is pertinent to highlight these approaches for clarity sake. According to Schmeck (2013), the forces that influence learning are as follows: activity based learning, experiential learning, game based learning and play based learning.

Activity based learning in school

According to Nudzor, Dare, Oduro, Bosu, and Addy (2015), activity based learning is a cognitive approach to learning wherein a child 'constructs' his/her own miniatures of knowledge from current and past experiences and knowledge as a result of an interaction with data stored in the mind. The child actively searches for new knowledge or information or discovers new information as a result of an activity in which the child is engaged in. the child therefore gains, adapts, and consumes the new information or knowledge acquired as the activity unfolds. Niesz and Krishnamurthy (2014) adding to this argue that activity based learning is a unique way of learning which children can use (if the facilitator drives the learning in that direction since teaching and learning work hand in hand) to develop at all levels. This is because the principles of activity based learning as an approach to learning and teaching or teaching and learning leaves

a majority of the responsibility on the learner rather than the teacher. Nudzor et al. (2015, p. 23) argue that with activity based learning, learning is an active and constructive process where the child has a tangible input of “doing”, and engagement with the world or the activity thereby constructing some form of meaning depending on the activity. Riding and Rayner (2013) sees activity based learning as engaging and the child expects the teacher to provide activities with which they can engage their minds and hands

Activity based learning therefore is a unique dynamic or approach of learning which is vital in the development of the child at all levels. And when this is linked to a context like Nigeria in general and Uyo Senatorial District in particular where socio-economic realities as well as cultural barriers produces different challenges in the lives of children, the individuality of the child is vital for total development. The teacher therefore prioritises every child making their learning meaningful.

Experiential learning in children

The second approach or dynamic of learning amongst children within the early childhood education face experiential learning. Kolb (2014) look at experiential learning as a process of knowledge construction used by children or learners to construct knowledge, develop skills which are value laden directly from experiences accumulated from outside formal academic settings.

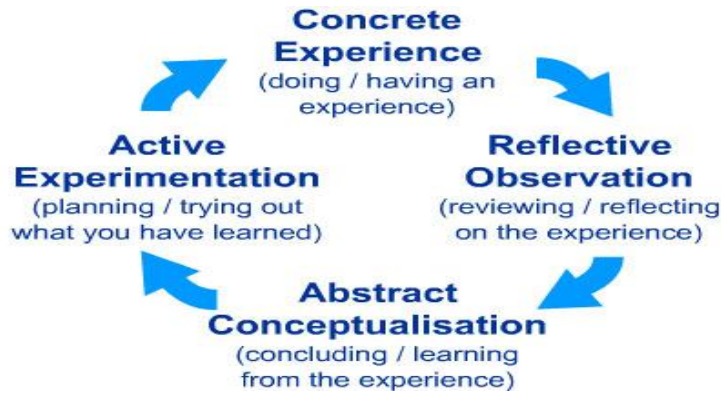
In experiential learning, Jordan et al. (2008) identifies four basic types of experiential learning to include: rational experiential learning, reflective experiential learning, transformative cyclical experiential learning and experiential learning. In the context of rational experiential learning, Jordan et al (2008) argue is a process which takes off with a problem. In other words, it is a problem-based learning. The problem is then given serious consideration in a systematic manner by the learner (Hwang, Sung, Hung, Huang & Tsai, 2012).

For reflective experiential learning, this involves a style of learning in which children are able to respond to unpredictable situations or experience with care and intelligence, which he argues is the basis for meaning or world making activity (Pritchard, 2013). This scholar argues that knowledge is embedded in skills and vice versa and it is the reflective utilisation of the one that the other is harnessed. This makes reflection very critical or unavoidable in constructing new tacit knowledge.

In the area of cyclical experiential learning, Kolb (2014) argues that learning is a cycle and this cycle can never be broken especially because experiences never end and meaning making is based on experience. Furthermore, the human mind especially that of a child can hardly be directed to begins process an idea from a particular point, the learning cycle is non-linear, as such begins from anywhere and keeps going around and round.

This is graphically demonstrated below.

Figure 1.1: Cyclical experiential learning

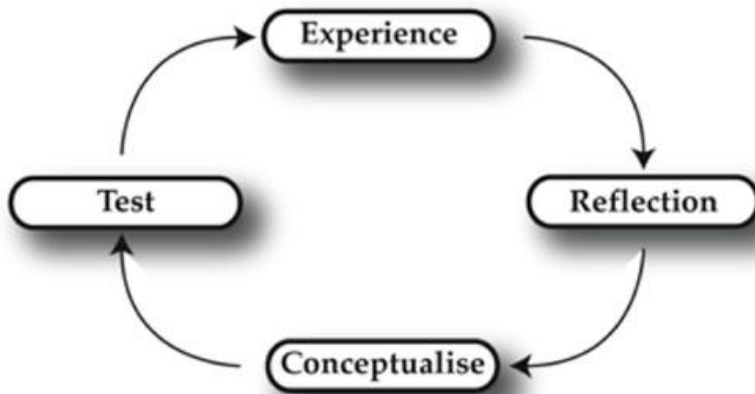


Source: Adopted from Kolb (2014)

Figure 1.1 above shows that there are four steps in the cyclical experiential learning plot namely: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The concrete experience stage is a reflective point where the child has full knowledge and conscious of the situation or problem and can experience as real or see it with the optical eyes (Kolb, 2014). This is gotten through the process of engaging and this leads to reflective observation, where the child carefully observes or reflects on the just concluded action which leads to the development or formulation of abstract rules or concepts about the phenomenon or experience for future purposes or experience (Klob, 2014). This rules or abstract formulations are then tested through experimentation leading to further modification and refinement of the experiential cycle and this keeps the cycle continuous.

This is represented in figure 1.2 below.

Figure 1.2: Operation of the cyclical experiential learning process



Source: Adopted from Kolb, 2014

Concerning transformative experiential learning, Mezirow (1997) is built on reflection which invariable leads to transformation. Slavich and Zimbardo (2012) contain that reflective processes which takes place when people change their learning habits or schema. The change in

ways of seeing things which begins with reflection on a set of attitudes, beliefs, or emotional reactions which the individual often exhibits, leads to further meaning making processes, interpreted and re-interpreted on the basis of previous experiences and a “clusters of meaning schemes” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). When this happens, that is, the changing of the meaning schemes, new process of knowledge construction are born, leading to transformation (Hyson, 2008). Experiential learning, therefore, is of great significance to in learning in early childhood development since it offers different windows through which learning can take place and how those who do learn using this learning style learning. This is therefore vital especially in the Nigeria context where educational resources are few and the only resources the child might have in abundance is the ideological ware or social capital.

Game based learning in children

In the context of game based learning, Vandercruysse, Vandewaetere and Clarebout (2012) says that it involve the use of games as a tool for learning in the classroom or any other environment. This means that games are a resource or tool which children can use to learn making, while having fun. Garris, Ahlers and Driskell (2002) provide an alternative definition of game based learning by considering it to be the use of games to support teaching and learning. In other words, game based learning is the ability to use intricate parts of a game to make meaning in the classroom creating room for meaningful experience to be created. Game based learning sees other materials associated with game as rules of the game for which the creation of meaning is tied to. The rules become the content of learning for easy assimilation (Tobias, Fletcher, & Wind, 2014). Meyer (2013) in the study of game-based language learning for pre-school children in Copenhagen, Denmark indicate that children perform maximally when they use play as the form of instruction. Similarly, Crookall (2007, p.23) make a case for “the need to integrate play into learning models” based on research in language play in learners’ socialisation and early language play.

Play based learning in children

Play based learning is a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representation (Moore, Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie & Boyd, 2014). From this definition, it is clear that play based learning is not simply about children doing whatever they like, as they run around, but a conscious exercise undertaken to guide learning. According to Sumsion, Grieshaber, McArdle and Shield (2014), play covers a wide variety of things and can range from the unstructured actions with little or no active adult support to a highly-structured activity led by specific instructions and directions from the teacher. Whichever direction play takes, the most significant issue is its ability to contribute to learning in the ECCDE. Though a child led or child-initiated play, free play or choice play is important for the continuous development of the child’s cognitive abilities (Roussou, 2004), the role of the teacher is not only by ensuring that the play is purpose, but that some form of meaning is constructed from it. Children by virtue of their being children, regardless of their age love to play, and it tapping into it in the teaching and learning process gives them the opportunity to develop physical competence as well as make sense of the real world or the world in which they live, while interacting with others, express and control their emotions (Roussou, 2004).

Formal Learning Setting

Folkestad (2006) look at formal learning setting as a place in which all learning activities plan and delivered under the auspices of an accredited institution of learning. According to Aderinoye (2007), is an organised and structured institution where learning process, guided by specific learning objectives in which the teacher is aimed to achieve at the end of such learning. A child that goes to such institution does so intentionally with the sole of learning objectives in mind, as well as the expected outcomes. In other words, the intention of learner is principally to gain knowledge, develop skills and build or develop competence in the area where the learning activity is taking place. Folkestad (2006) add that when we talk of formal education, we are talking about initial education and training system as designated by the government of the nation.

In Nigeria, there are factors that influence pre-primary school learners to learn. Abolarin (2014) list factors that enhance children to learn in pre-primary school to include: relevant instructional materials, method of teaching, and friendly teachers, these are discussed below.

Instructional Materials

Relevant instructional materials are a panacea for effective learning to take at pre-primary education level. For learning to be effective and interesting in the preschool programme, the teachers must use different types of toys as play materials (Abolarin, 2014). Toys which are physical and man-made objects are employ as tools of play for children, thereby providing them great fun and amusement. Obadiah (2008) reports that educational toys are items that challenge, stimulate or encourage children to learn through play in the school. In an environment where there are insufficient toys in the school, Abolarin (2014) say that it is necessary for teacher or school authority to ensure that improvisation of learning items are made. This scholar (Abolarin) is of the view that the preschool children learn through experimentation, discovery, visual process and playing with objects. According to Tambowua, (2013), good toys assist children cognitive growth and the development of fine motor skills that can improve attention span and problem-solving ability.

Methods of teaching in pre-primary school

The application of appropriate teaching strategies at that pre-primary school children is a solution to effective learning. Abolarin (2014) say that the most effective method of teaching pre-primary children is play method which was originated by Maria Montessori. Abolarin is of the view that play method is an active method of teaching that is child-centred and also based on child development theories. Biswas (2012) contain that the significance of play in teaching is that a child is happiest when engrossed in play and play can happen in different forms such as imitation of family members, to playing with toys, or playing tag, hide seek or simply running about with other children. A study conducted by Esomonu (2005) in Nigeria on the use of play method in pre-primary schools indicates that playful situations keep the children alert, active and responsive.

In a sharp contrast, Ekeyi (2013) in his study say that the most appropriate teaching method to be used at pre-primary school level is the demonstration. Mundi (2006) see demonstration method as a display or an exhibition usually done by the teacher while the children watch with keen interest and this involves showing how something works or the steps involved in the process. Scholars such as Ogwo and Oranu (2006), Ayang and Idaka (2012) contain that demonstration method is the most widely used instructional method at the pre-

primary education level for acquisition of practical skills as it involves verbal and practical illustration of a given procedure. Essa (2012) opine that by showing learners how to perform an activity as well as telling them about the activity stimulate both their visual and auditory responses and therefore accelerates the learning process in the class.

Friendly Teachers

A study conducted on early childhood education teachers' friendliness in London indicate that there is a tremendous opportunity for children's social and emotional growth during the preschool years if a teacher exhibit some degree of friendship with the children (Epstein, 2009). To be friendly assist the children to feel secure, confident, and likeable. Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2013) in their study say that improving learners' relationships with teachers has important, positive and long-lasting implications for both learners' academic and social development. In a similar vein, McCaleb (2013) argue that those learners who have close, positive and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflict in their relationships. According to Thompson (1998), the most critical weapon available to pre-primary education teachers who want to foster a favourable learning climate is a positive relationship with our students.

It is worthy to note that learners who have uncomfortable relationship with their teachers finds it hard to concentrate in the class activity. This assertion was supported by Canter and Canter (1997, p.6) who state that "we all can recall classes in which we did not try very hard because we did not like our teachers." Teachers' friendly disposition at the foundation phase of formal education is important because it make children to have undiluted likeness for education.

Constraints to Children Learning in Formal Education Setting

Quality and qualification of teachers

The quality of the teachers determines the strength of any educational system and the value of the learners (Okoro, 2004). In Nigerian early childhood institutions today, the teacher quality is generally low. It is only a few of the nursery schools especially those owned by educational institutions, private companies and wealthy individuals that can afford to engage the services of university graduate teachers and holders of Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) qualifications, competent and committed teachers and are also capable of retaining such teachers. In a situation where most of the teachers in our early childhood institutions are unqualified and/or unprofessional, effective teaching and learning cannot be achieved.

Proliferation of Early Childhood Institutions

The official provision made in the National Policy on Education (FGN 2004) mandated the Government to encourage private efforts in the provision of early childhood education in the country. Moreso, owing to the high demand for early childhood education by parents, it does not take a long time for newly established early childhood institutions to grow and develop. According to Nwakaego (2007), it is becoming customary to operate a early childhood institution in every household. currently, early childhood education institutions are located in various places and buildings-campuses of some universities and colleges, premises of some industrial and business organizations, church premises, residential buildings some part or the whole of which are hired for use as early childhood schools (Ejeh, 2006). The flip side of this proliferation of

early childhood institutions is that, the issue of standard and “regulations” have been waved off. The end result is that the young minds are offered “substandard” and “irregular” education that can not breed egalitarianism and self-reliant individuals of the society and leaders of tomorrow.

In-effective Supervision of Early Childhood Institutions

No educational plan however excellent it may be, can be effectively implemented if the school supervision is ineffective. State Ministry of Education officials are in principle, supposed to visit and inspect the physical plant, the human and other resources available in a proposed nursery school and if these are found to be adequate, the ministry would approve the school for operation.

Language Policy Implementation

Inspite of the laudable provision of the language policy nothing much seems to have been achieved. Firstly, the position of Nigerian language as a medium of instruction is hard to come by. The FGN/UNICEF (1993) reported that about 93.2% of teaching and learning in Nigeria preschools was done in English. The 6.8% use immediate language shows clear lackadaisical attitude towards the implementation of the issue of medium of instruction in mother-tongue or language of immediate community. This problem is likely to be connected with parents and pupils interest in English which has been in use since 1842, as well as its official position in Nigeria (Tor-Anyiin, 2008). The low literacy rate even in English indicates poor implementation of the language policy, he further maintained that lack of implementation of language policy has affected the quality of Nigeria Educational development.

Negligence on the Part of Government

Of all the measures that Federal Government undertook in order to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of early childhood education, the only one it has effectively accomplished is the granting of permission for private efforts in the provision of early childhood education in the country, with virtually less or non participation by the public sector. This, in addition to lack of supervision to ensure the maintenance of standards, has led to increases in numbers of early childhood education institutions in the country (Ejeh, 2006).

Prospects in the Basic Curriculum Provision of National Policy on Pre-Primary Education

1. The FRN (2004) outlined some steps the government designed to achieve the objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria, which are as follows;
2. Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education
3. Making provision in Teacher Training Institution for production of specialist teacher in Pre-primary education.
4. Ensuring that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the local community.
 - a. Develop the orthography for many more Nigerian languages, and
 - b. Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages, FRN reported that some of these developments are already being pursued in the University Departments of linguistics under the auspices of some state ministries of Education. This Language centre will be expanded so as to have wide scope;

5. Ensure that the main method of teaching in the pre-primary institutions will be through play and that the curriculum of teacher training college is appropriately oriented to achieve this.

Conclusion

The importance of a solid foundation in education is obvious. Early Childhood education is where the foundation is laid. Poor performance in the other levels of academics can be traced to this foundation level. So a thorough knowledge of what, and how education is been handled at this level is imperative. Therefore, government needs a strong determination to implement the strategies that will necessarily enhance learning and quality development of early childhood/pre-primary education in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. There is need for state ministry of education officials to enforce the regulations laid down by the Federal Ministry of Education in regard to the provisions of early Childhood Education. Effective quality monitoring units should be set up by ministries of education and provide with necessary logistic support to ensure that minimum standards are maintained in both public and private preprimary institutions.
2. Respective state ministries of education under National supervision should handle the issue of orthographies. Decentralization will be more helpful as respective states will know the mother tongues or the language of immediate environment. More so, Local Government Education Authorities (LGEA) rather than states should assist in the production of textbooks in the spoken language in the area. Regular supervision and monitoring with stiff penalties for offenders will help to maintain the teacher-pupil ratio. This will also help teachers to supervise the learning experience of the play method.
3. Effective measures should be ensured in the training of early childhood/pre-primary teachers through adequate scholarships, approving the mounting of such programmes in all Universities, Institutes of Education and College of Education.

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