

GUIDED OUTDOOR PLAY: A HOLISTIC APPROACH STRATEGY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The problem of teaching and learning in early childhood programmes in Nigeria is that prominent attention has been given to knowledge acquisition through drilling and recitation. This is inappropriate for early childhood education. The purpose of this paper is to propose a strategy that teachers/caregivers can use for teaching, learning and development in early childhood programme. The strategy is the holistic approach which incorporates learning and development in cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual development of the child as they all integrate together. Since child's development cannot be fragmented into health, nutrition, education, social, emotional and spiritual areas of development and learning, as progress in one area affects progress in others. The approach cited in this paper therefore discusses namely: holistic education, guided outdoor play and presented a holistic approach to the care of all aspects of child's learning and development. Some recommendations are made which emphasized that teaching and learning in early childhood should be holistic approach to education. This approach according to this paper integrate a teaching practice that focus less on traditional milestones of academic development but more on the complete physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual well-being of the child.

Keywords: Guided outdoor play, holistic approach, strategy, early childhood education, Nigeria.

Introduction

A substantial body of research establishes that preschool education has an impact on the learning and development of young children (Ojile, 2019). Many authors have observed the immediate effects of preschool education for children during the first five years of life to be clearly positive. Eyisi (2013) asserts that early childhood education provide the first and earliest understanding of the working of the world to the child. Eyisi further maintained that

early childhood education plays an important role in the process of socialization of children as they are introduced into the culture and traditions of their society which serves as a foundation for their later immersion into the life of the society.

Early childhood education (ECE) is the education given to children prior to their entering the primary school. They include the crèche (0-2 years), play class (2-3years) the nursery (3-5 years) and pre-primary or Kindergarten (5-6 years) (Federal Republic of Nigeria FRN, 2013). The purposes of this level of education according to the National Policy on Education (2014) include to: a) effect a smooth transition from the home to the school b) prepare the child for the primary level of education) provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work d) inculcate social norms e) inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys f)develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit g) learn good habits, especially good health habits, h) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colors, shapes, forms among others.

To achieve the above objectives the principle that educational practices must match the developmental level of the children which is known as developmentally appropriate practice must be applied. Developmentally appropriate practice means that educational practices are rooted in research about how young children develop and learn (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). The goal of developmentally appropriate practice is to promote optimal learning and development for children. At school, particularly at the pre-primary level, the children ought to be taught according to the provision and guidelines of the National Policy of Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), which recommends teaching of rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes through play however, serious violations of the provisions and guidelines of the National Policy on Education are observed at this level.

According to Korb (2016), many early childhood programmes in Nigeria have a very narrow view of early childhood education that includes only instruction in letters and numbers. Government provided a simple curriculum as a guideline for the operations at the preschool level. This simple guideline allows the teaching of children through play. To develop children with early childhood education curriculum, holistic approach which helps cover all developments of the child seems to be more appropriate.

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is the education given to children between ages of zero to five. In Nigeria early childhood education (ECE) is perceived as education provided to children in the educational institution before they enter primary school (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Early childhood education is also referred to as early childhood care Development and Education (ECCDE), this refers to all programmes and services that support care, development and learning of children from birth to five years in Nigeria (FRN, 2007) ECCDE includes programmes offered under early childhood education; such as crèche, nursery and pre-primary school in Nigeria (FRN, 2013).

The children at this level are known for certain characteristics that are peculiar to them. Knowledge of these characteristics is important in guiding children's development. For instance, during early childhood, children are physically active. They run around, kick, jump,

and climb chairs and other objects and through this they develop the explorative ability and subsequently intellectual ability. Evans, Myers and Ilfeld (2000) observed that children are naturally motivated to explore and to attempt to master their environment.

The early childhood period is also characterized by a stage when young children are intellectually curious and explorative in nature. Thus children at this stage receive care and education through play especially outdoor play where the environment is richly prepared. But on the contrary learning is disseminated by direct teaching approach which makes learning inappropriate. Korb (2016) observed that the idea that early childhood education should foster academic knowledge to prepare them for school is short-sighted.

Akinsola (2011) observed that a good early childhood education Programme therefore is the one that should be to provide learning activities that nurture learning and growth in all domains of development within the child's cultural context. Therefore, for holistic development of the child in early childhood education, opportunity should be given to children to play outdoor, where they can explore and manipulate the environment.

Holistic Education

Holistic education is a philosophy of education based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning and purpose in life through connection to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as character, compassion and peace. Holistic Approach in Education means engaging and developing the whole person through education. Holistic approach helps to bring the development of the different levels for the learners. It covers physical, emotional, cognitive, language and spiritual development. It's the concept that the human being is multi-dimensional, it consists of inter-dependent dimensions; meaning that the child's development cannot be fragmented into health, nutrition, education, social, emotional and spiritual variables. All are interconnected in a child's life and are developing simultaneously.

Young children's development is holistic. In the early years, young children are rapidly developing in all domains of development, including cognitive, physical, social, character and spiritual (National Association for the Education of Young children, 2009). Development is inter-related, meaning that development in one domain influences development in the other domains as well. Progress in one area affects progress in others. Similarly, when something goes wrong in anyone of those, it has an impact on all other areas, therefore, learning at this level should not be academic based but learning at this level seems better through play based activities as this will incorporate all domains of development.

However, many early childhood programs in Nigeria only focus on academic knowledge (Gyang, 2016; Haggai & Shuwamut, 2016). Holistic early childhood education focuses not only on academic knowledge, but more importantly on social, character, physical, and spiritual development as well as broader cognitive skills, which makes play and especially guided outdoor play an holistic appropriate strategy for teaching in early childhood. Holistic education not only prepares children for school, but also helps children develop attitudes, values, knowledge, and skills that will help them thrive in life.

An integrated view of learning sees the child as a person who wants to learn, sees the task as a meaningful whole, and sees the whole as greater than the sum of its individual and tasks or experiences, it integrate learning and development, it's a constant warm relationships that connect everything together and give opportunities for open-ended exploration and especially guided outdoor play.

Guided Outdoor Play

To ensure that children grow to their full potential, they should be provided with opportunity for play and especially guided outdoor play. Guide outdoor play is otherwise known as play with a purpose, is any activity that offers preschoolers specific learning objectives that teaches new skills where there is typically an adult leader. It is a type of play that is planned and set up by the teacher in a stimulating environment. Guided outdoor play experiences provide adult scaffolding in the context of activities that young children find engaging and motivating. Weisberg, Hirsh, Golinkoff, Kittredge and Klah (2016) explained that in guided outdoor play children direct their own play exploration with adult guidance has two components, where teachers set up the environments and suggestions to nudge children towards a learning goal while still providing children with choices, guided outdoor play falls within adult guidance component.

According to Frost (2002), too many educators, politicians and parents, believe outdoor play takes time away from academic activities. As a result, outdoor play in many schools is limited or totally eliminated. Further, programs that do not advocate outdoor play often focus on learning cognitive and academic skills, rather than encouraging exploration and problem solving through guided outdoor play.

Play is one of young children's developmental tasks and a critical part of their activities which is believed to enhance total development of the child. This must have informed Nigeria to put play as the method of learning in pre-primary schools. Henniger (2005) suggested that play most effectively support learning and development when children have opportunity for both free and outdoor play (Henniger, 2005). The outdoors can be described as an open and constantly changing environment where it is possible to experience freedom, gross and boisterous movement and contact with natural environment. Outdoor play refers to play that take place outside the classroom either on a playground or play yard, where children's play can take off, flourish, and come to full expression, make a mess, run, jump, hide, shout, whistle, hide and explore the natural world.

Play especially guided outdoor play is sometimes contrasted with "work" and characterized as a type of activity which is essentially unimportant, trivial and leading in any serious learning and development purpose. This is because during play, children are seen to pack sand, mud, water and become dirty. As such it is seen as something children do because they are immature, and as something they will grow out of as they become adults. However, this view is mistaken and misleading. Guided outdoor play is a means of prominent teaching strategy in early childhood education, where children can explore and manipulate the environment for effective learning and development.

Importance of Guided Outdoor Play

Guided outdoor play experiences are important for a child's learning and development and should always be supervised by a teacher or a care giver. Theorists stated that large muscle activity through play is not a luxury rather it is a necessity for young developing children (Bowers, 1988).

In a time when electronic technology influences children to be ever more sedentary in their free time, the importance of outdoor play should be increasingly heightened. Children need vigorous physical activities in which they can move and gain mastery. This implies that as far as technology has evolved vigorously, it has impacted the preschool children development negatively as they have become more dormant. Such dormancy has many learning and development defects like overweight/obesity and bad habits.

Physical play mostly occurs outside and provides children opportunity to release their energy using vigorous activity and loud voice. The North Carolina childcare Health and Safety Resource Centre noted that all children, from birth to age five as well as school age should engage in daily physical activities and movement skills (Abbort & Rodger, 1994).

Most children naturally develop the ability to run and walk. However, they require practice to and instruction to develop hopping, galloping, sliding, catching, jumping, throwing, kicking, bouncing and sticking skills. Children incorporate these skills into sports, games and dance. Playgrounds are perfect places for a child to develop mental connections, socialize, and develop fine and gross motor skills. Regular outdoor play activities are important parts of lives of most children in many ways, including helping build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints, helping control weight, reduce fats and preventing or delaying the development of high blood pressure (Calbom, 2012).

According to Perkins, Jacobs, Barber and Eccles (2004), Childhood sports participation is a significant predictor of young adults' participation in sports and physical fitness activities. Physical activities are associated with improved academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores. Further, such activities can affect cognition, skills, attitude and academic behaviour, including enhanced concentration, attention and improved classroom behaviour (Calbom, 2012).

Factors Affecting Guided Outdoor Play

There are increasing pressures on children's opportunities for guided outdoor play. These pressures may include parental expectations of academic progress from an early age, increase pressure for child supervision at all time due to lack of safety, traffic dangers and parental fears. The following are the main factors or barriers to children's rights to outdoor play.

Insecurity, child labour, exploitation, war and neighborhood violence are some of the factors that can inhibit outdoor play. Frost (2010) observed that Mothers are reluctant and fearful to allow their children to play outside; this fear is related to increase in child trafficking, crime, harassment, violence and possible abduction. Insecurity of children has become a major concern for parents and teachers due to increased social problems. As such children are no longer left to play outside. At the same time rates of obesity and self-harm diagnosed in

children have climbed significantly. This is attributed to well recognized phenomena of “nature deficit disorder” arising from children having very limited access to the outdoors and natural environments.

Child labour and exploitation are common practices in Nigeria, children are bread winners in some families and in some cases they are treated in an unfair way in order to make money, by sending them to hawk on the street from a tender age. This will definitely deprive them of the right to play because of the responsibility saddled upon them. War and neighborhood violence also inhibit guided outdoor play in that majority of the children become orphans and homeless and do not have access to guided outdoor play since they are stressed and still struggling with the basic needs of life.

Other reasons are lack of developmentally appropriate strategies due to curriculum used, which is academically based instead of play, lack of understanding of the value of play as a foundation for academic concepts, rote memorization and recall of information which remain the norm in many settings. In agreement, Korb (2016) asserted that many early childhood programmes in Nigeria have a very narrow view of early childhood education that includes only instruction in letters and numbers. For instance, preschoolers could be kept in school from 8a.m to 2p.m and in some cases from 8a.m to 5p.m before being picked up by their parents. And after school hours, these children come home saddled with assignments that will not leave them with any breathing space for play before they return again to school the following morning. These assignments are purely academics as they require that the child recites, memorize, write and solve problems. Children are seen to be stressed not only physically but also mentally and could be punished by their parents and or teachers should they fail to attend to the homework. This development is not a healthy one as it could impede their cognitive development and effective functioning later in life.

In addition, some teachers sometimes fail to accompany their children to play on the play ground instead; they get busy with academic work and lesson note writing in the class room. This also is aside the fact that sometimes they could be compelled to replace or repair damaged play facilities by children and this could discourage them from guiding their children during guided outdoor play. Many schools for instance, host a large number of children such that the play fields are overstretched aside the fact that the fields are open with no facilities that pupils can play with.

Also, parental and caregiver misconceptions about play have contributed to the inadequacies of guided outdoor play embarked upon by children. Many people express the belief that play is frivolous and that play opportunities take time away from true learning. As a result, curriculum and early learning standards do not address play. Many schools have curricular standards for pre-primary level yet seldom include play based learning activities and teaching methods. For example, a review of Early Learning and Development Standards of 37 countries by UNICEF revealed that only in one third of the standards, the concept of playful learning was well integrated.

Furthermore, teachers’ professional developments do not focus on learning through play. Many teachers are not adequately prepared to implement play based learning in their classrooms. They may think of learning materials only as workbooks or charts on the wall

rather than objects that children can explore and use in their learning. In addition, large class sizes that limit children's freedom to play is another factor that affect play in pre-primary setting and changes exist when classes are too large. When more than 30 children are in a relatively small space, inside the class room or on the playground, this make it difficult for caregivers to support children's play through active experiences, personal conversation and thought provoking questions.

Furthermore, there is a national trend to focus on the academic fundamentals of reading and arithmetic, one of the practical effects of the trend is decreased time left during the school day for other academic subjects, as well as guided outdoor play, creative arts, and physical education. This trend may have implications for the cognitive skills of the children. In addition, many after school child care programs prioritize an extension of academics and homework completion over organized guided outdoor play. This may have implications on children's ability to store new information, because children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity. Pre-schools and kindergartens have become particularly regimented with teachers feeling compelled to increase numeracy instruction at the expense of guided outdoor playtime.

It was generally assumed that young children do not participate fully in guided outdoor play. According to the Canadian National Longitudinal survey of children and youth (NLSCY), only 36% of 2 to 3 years old and 44% of 4 to 5 years old engage in unorganized sport and physical activity each week (Tremblay, Brownris & Deans, 2008). A report from UNICEF and NERDC (2010) in selected states in Nigeria indicated that safe play grounds were fully available in 14 communities out of the 50 communities, not available in 18 and somehow available in 18 communities. It was observed that 72% have problem with availability of playgrounds for children, thereby depriving children outdoor play opportunities, which may be of great disadvantage to the cognitive skills development.

Another report from UNICEF and NERDC (2010) revealed that most parents do not understand the implication of play in the development of children. They do not encourage play for children. Many send their children for after pre-primary programme lesson to learn the three RS (reading, writing, arithmetic); this deprivation in play has led to great decrease in guided outdoor play.

The decrease in guided outdoor play can also be explained by children being passively entertained through television or computer video games, in a time when electronic technology influences children to be ever more sedentary in their free time. This implies that as far as technology has evolved vigorously, it has impacted the pre-primary school pupils' development negatively as they become more dormant. Such dormancy has many health defects like overweight/obesity and bad habits, which could adversely affect cognitive development. Schools that promote sedentary styles of learning, become a more difficult environment for children to navigate successfully (Manwaring & Taylor, 2006).

Recommendations

1. Guided outdoor play should be a prominent teaching strategy in early childhood education, where children can explore and manipulate the environment for effective learning and development.
2. Teaching and learning in early childhood should adopt and use the holistic approach to education which integrates a teaching practice that focuses less on traditional milestones of academic development but more on the complete physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual well-being of the child.
3. The teaching approach in Early Education should change from direct teaching approach for academic development in early childhood education to play approach. Guided outdoor play should be one of the approaches of play to consider as it fosters holistic learning and development in early childhood education.
4. Guided outdoor play should be given a specific allocation on the time table, in order to comply with appropriate teaching strategy for this level, as this will help learners to learn effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching and learning in early childhood education needs to promote holistic development which include cognitive, social, spiritual, physical and emotional development. Also, education in the early childhood needs to take a broader view of learning by moving out of direct teaching approach for academic development where children are being drilled in reciting and reading the letters of the alphabets and numbers and upgrade to teaching that incorporate learning and development through guided outdoor play.

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