

University to community pilot preschool programme: The effects on learning environment, teachers' attitude and children holistic development

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ABSTRACT

There is no gainsaying the fact that Early Childhood Education generally, and preschool education in particular, is faced with myriad of problems in Nigeria. Scholars, government agencies and non-governmental organisations have been struggling to find lasting solutions to these problems but the successes recorded have been quite insignificant. This might be as a result of the non-implementation of various research findings and the gap between the theories learnt and practices in preschools. It is, therefore, imperative for teacher trainers to take the policies, principles and theories of teaching to the preschool levels so as to serve as models. Some preschool sections in some public primary schools in Ibadan, Oyo State were selected and their needs in terms of learning resources, teaching force and developmentally appropriate instructions were attended to. Mixed methods research design of triangulation type was adopted. The data gathered after a term of 13 weeks revealed that there is a little improvement in the learning environment and the development of the children holistically. But the attitude of the teachers has not been changed significantly. Recommendations are made for future practices on the programme.

Keywords: Preschool education, learning environment, whole-child development, education theories and practices, preschool project.

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INTRODUCTION

Another remarkable achievement was recorded in the history of Nigerian educational system in the year 2004 when the Federal Government started to provide preschool education for Nigerian children. This led to the establishment of 1-year preschool section in the existing public primary schools (FRN, 2004). This represented an important turnaround in the history of Basic Education in the country because prior to that year, the provision of preschool education was left in the hand of private individuals, organisations and institutions (FRN, 1998).

The recognition accorded to preschool education might not be unconnected to the realisation of the benefits associated with this level of education. Oduolowu (2011) submits that attending a well-established preschool education is the only opportunity a child has to gain a holistic development in terms of social, emotional, physical, intellectual and creative skills. It also affects the

behaviour of children positively in terms of attention, effort, class participation and discipline (Salami and Peluola, 2012). Since the 'oil boom' period in the 1970s to date, a good number of mothers in Nigeria have joined the working class even during child rearing. Common sense shows that it is safer and professionally more advantageous to keep children in a well-organised early childhood centre than to keep them in the care of grandmothers or house helps. This is so because it is expected that teachers and caregivers at the centres have been trained on child development and child rearing practices. A research conducted in the United States on Head Start graduates reveals the long term economic benefits of Early Childhood Education to national development (Heckman and Masterov, 2004). Heckman and Masterov submitted that if children experience a well-organised early childhood education, they would perform

better in their higher education pursuit and job training later in life. Some other benefits of preschool education are highlighted in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), some of which include that fact that it effects smooth transmission from home to school; prepares the child for primary level of education; inculcates social norms; develops a sense of co-operation and team-spirit and so on (FRN, 2004).

As beneficial and developmentally advantageous as preschool education sounds, the organization, planning and practices in public schools in Nigeria are capable of rendering this vital level of education impotent. Several studies have shown that the state of facilities and resources, the teaching force and methods of instruction adopted and the method of evaluation at the preschool sections in public primary schools have not been producing the kind of 'totally developed children' parents and educationists had hoped for (Ogunsanwo and Salami, 2010; Salami, 2011; Salami and Peluola, 2012).

The first noticeable shortcoming of the 1-year preschool provided by the government is the unattractiveness of the classrooms and the surroundings. Since what all the existing primary schools had to do was to adapt one of their classrooms for the preschool section, there was no innovation, the chairs for the primary schools were given to the children, no play materials, and the environment, in effect, is seriously unattractive. Any environment that will stimulate children to learn must have adequate learning resources. Figures 1 and 2 are typical examples of the environment provided by the government for preschool age children to learn. There are serious implications of these for learning and development of the children.

One of these implications is that children will not like to be in the environment, hence they will resort to crying almost all the time and their emotion will not be favourable to learning. Besides this, the physical development of the children will be retarded since necessary facilities to ensure this are not available. Lastly, the children will be forced to stay in the environment which, more often than not, leads to beating by the teacher, a development that impedes learning and fun.

Apart from the learning environment, another disturbing issue about the 1-year preschool provided in the public primary school is the inadequate quality and number of the teaching force. The National Association of Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2012), in their developmentally appropriate practices, submit that in a class of 25 children, there must be a class teacher, an assistant teacher and a helper. Also, according to the National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria (FRN, 2007), there should be one caregiver and one helper in a class with a maximum of 35 children of age 3 to 5 years old. But a field survey carried out by this researcher in the year 2014 reveals that there used to be a teacher in a class of averagely 30 preschool children and in most cases, such a teacher has another



Figure 1. Preschool teacher's seat and boxes for records.



Figure 2. The black board and the children's seats in the preschool classroom.

primary class to attend to. In other words, the system is besieged by the problem of inadequate number of teachers attending to preschool children in the public primary schools. Little wonder individual differences among the children cannot be accounted for and proper records about the individual development of the children in the four developmental domains are non-existent.

Perhaps, the worst problem confronting the 1-year preschool programme provided by the government in public primary schools relate to the sort of instructional methods/strategies adopted by the teachers. Not only do the teachers adopt teacher-centred method but such condemned and discredited methods of teaching children as rote learning and memorisation.

A lot of developmentally inappropriate practices permeate this section of primary schools. For instance, blackboards are nailed to the wall of preschool classrooms where all sorts of contents are written. The children are compelled to memorise these contents through rote learning. They are made to copy notes even when it is clear that their hands would have to be guided

by the teacher as they have not mastered the alphabets. All these practices are against the principle of developmentally appropriate practices in Early Childhood Education (Tomlinson and Hyson, 2008).

The 1-year preschool section in public primary school is now ten years old. There is dearth of information about any attempt to ameliorate the factors militating against the effectiveness of this programme in terms of the conditions of learning. Many studies have been carried out on the provision of resources (Ogunsanwo and Salami, 2010; Okeyinka, 2013; Dagunduro and Akeredolu, 2013; Adesanya et al., 2012); practices (Babalola and Odunsi, 2013; Fowowe and Ashimolowo, 2013; Adeleke, 2012) and effectiveness (Salami and Peluola, 2012; Iroegbu and Inyang, 2012; Ogunsanwo, 2012) of the 1-year preschool. However, the scholarly contributions which these studies have made to knowledge are few and they include information about how inadequate, inappropriate and ineffective this level of education has been. Nothing has been done to transform this level of education and make it better. To date, there is no information about any governmental or non-governmental agency doing anything about the problems identified with the 1-year preschool education in the public primary schools.

Indeed, the effectiveness and functionality of the preschools established in the public primary schools in their current state to develop the children holistically is doubtful. It was this concern that led to a research conducted by Salami and Peluola in the year 2011 designed to compare the total development of Primary I pupils who attended the preschool sections in public primary school and those that did not (Salami and Peluola, 2012). The finding from this study reveals that there was no significant difference between pupils that attended preschool in public primary schools and those that did not attend preschool at all in terms of their social, emotional and physical development. The difference was significant only in the intellectual development. This simply shows that the preschools established in the public primary schools have not been effective and functional in term of developing the recipient holistically.

The state of these government-owned preschools has been negatively affecting the privately owned ones too. There are many substandard private Nursery and Primary Schools established all over Nigerian cities and towns which emulate the government owned schools. If this development is not addressed quickly, it could lead to a situation whereby society will not see the benefits of preschool education and there might be a clarion call for the eradication of preschool education.

There is, therefore, the need to conduct a research on the effectiveness of a well-established public preschool in which developmentally appropriate practices are employed and combined with child-centred instructional strategies in an environment that is attractive to children and capable of enhancing their social, emotional,

physical and intellectual development throughout the lower classes of primary school. The establishment of such effective and functional public preschools is crucially important not only for the sake of information but because of the the children of the masses that will be attending these schools since they are tuition free. Also it will reduce to the barest minimum the tendency to establish sub-standard private preschools in our society.

The birth of university to community pilot preschool project (UCPPP)

The supervision of professional Teaching Practice (TP) is an academic exercise in undergraduate programme designed to expose university academics in the faculties of education to the happenings at lower levels of education. Visitations to various schools have revealed not only the extent to which the educational theories taught in universities are being put into use but also the extent to which educational policies are being implemented. The 2013 TP exercise of the University of Ibadan was the first time the lecturers in the Early Childhood Unit, Department of Teacher Education, insisted that all students majoring in Early Childhood Education posted to preschools and primary schools must be supervised by lecturers in Early Childhood Education Unit. This led to the visitation of more primary schools by lecturers specialising in early childhood and primary education. It was the visitations that revealed that the degree and complexion of problems facing this level of education varies from one school to another. In the schools located in the elite areas of the cities and towns, the earlier discussed problems are found to be not seriously severe especially in regard to the facilities provided. A good example is Abadina Primary school II at the University of Ibadan where the size and type of chairs and tables provided for the children are deemed to be appropriate. However, in the schools located in less salubrious parts of our cities and towns, the problems are quite severe and relentless. In some of these schools children are packed into cramped classrooms with leaking roof and fallen ceilings, and equipped with chairs meant for upper primary pupils. In addition to inadequate chairs, peeling paint works and cracked wall, the floor of some of these classrooms are not plastered and the doors and windows have come off their hinges. In short, the classrooms are in a terrible state of disrepair in most cases. To make matters worse, the teachers assigned to the children are overburdened with work as they have to divide their attention between several classes. This was the case in IMG Primary School III Makola, Ibadan. In addition to the problems facing other public preschools, IMG Primary School III had children, in the preschool section, who could speak no other language beside Hausa. Two groups of children were packed together in the class- the age 4 years plus and age 5 years plus.

These children were usually exposed to the same 'academic instructions'. There was a serious disconnect between the teacher-centred instruction and the children because the teacher could not speak Hausa language. This preschool was nothing more than a dumping ground for children. Though the classroom provided for the children has a door and windows, the floor was plastered and the outer wall was painted. There was no single learning resource or facility for children in the school. A short interview with the Head-teacher reveals that government has not been given any resources and it seems they are not ready to.

The future implication of these practices was considered alarming on those individual children and to the togetherness of the nation as a whole. For instance, it can lead to the children hating western education and which can also lead to drop-out; poor educational foundation that will lead to poor academic performances in external examination and lack of good care for the Hausa children in Ibadan. All of these could lead the children hating their Yoruba neighbours in the future. The urge to prevent these and other unexpected implications and the need for empirical studies on this 1-year preschool programme in public primary schools provided the impetus for this researcher to establish a programme that was later named University to Community Pilot Preschool Project (UCPPP). A team of voluntary students (undergraduates but latter postgraduates joined) was formed and permission was sought from the Head-teacher before the programme took-off on January 2014. The intervention was carried out for a whole term and data were collected on the practices, supplies and the behaviour of the children.

This report, therefore, presents information on the effects of the preschool intervention programme which involved provision of learning resources, reinforcement of teachers and applying developmentally appropriate practices to a holistic development of children in the preschool section of a public primary school. The holistic development involves the four developmental domains of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development.

Research questions

The following research questions were answered in this report based on the UCPPP project:

1. What are the effects of UCPPP on the learning environment of preschool children in IMG primary school III, Makola, Ibadan?
2. To what extent does UCPPP affect the holistic development of the children in terms of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development?
3. What are the effects of UCPPP on the attitude of the preschool teachers towards the education of young children?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted mixed method research design of the triangulation type. Qualitative data were collected simultaneously and equally important, to complement the quantitative data which make the design QUAN + QUAL type (Ary et al., 2010). The qualitative aspect of the design involves the documentations, recordings and supply of resources while the quantitative research design adopted was the pretest-posttest one-group quasi-experimental because the study is an action research. A purposive sampling method was used to select the public primary school used for the study. The criterion used was to look for a public primary school with preschool section that has severe problem. IMG School III was selected because of the following additional problems facing the preschool section: firstly, almost all the children were of Hausa extraction and understood neither Yoruba nor English language and the teacher did not understand Hausa language too. Secondly, two groups of children were packed together and exposed to the same contents- the age 4years plus and the age 5years plus which position the age 4years group into disadvantage. The sample size was 19 children and 1 in-service teacher. Out of the 19 children, 18 (94.7%) were Hausas; 12 (63.2) of the children were age 4years and 7 (36.8%) were age 5years old. Ten (52.6%) of the children were boys and 9 (47.4%) were girls. Since the school did not have the National Integrated Early Childhood Curriculum, the contents to be taught were copied out of the scheme of work available in the school. These contents were used to prepare the stimulus instrument which was a pack of different child-centred lesson plans. A multiple-domain, open-ended observation schedule was designed to measure the socio-emotional and physical development of the children. This was used alongside different worksheets that were used to measure the intellectual development of the children. ICT facilities like camera, i-pads and i-phones were also used to record data along the print research instruments. The treatment took a whole term (13 weeks) and 3 visitations were made per week except the last week where the visitation was ones as a result of the preparation for examination by the undergraduate students involved in the study. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the quantitative data collected while pictures and item analysis were used to analyse the qualitative data.

RESULTS

Research question 1: What are the effects of UCPPP on the learning environment of preschool children in IMG primary school III, Makola, Ibadan?

The pre-assessment carried out in the school revealed that the only materials available in the preschool classroom and its surroundings are: (i) a bench and a table for the teachers, (ii) benches and tables that sit three children each, (iii) black board, (iv) some records like attendance register, diary and exercise books for the children. Figures 1 and 2 present these pictorially.

Since this project is a voluntary service rendered by the investigator and some of his undergraduate students, there was no financial capacity to solve all the needs of this school. The first thing done was to rearrange the class such that age-3 years old children were separated from age-4 years old ones. The classroom arrangement was put in 'U' shape. Three pieces of colourful mats were bought and these were spread in the open space created

in the classroom whenever the children had activities to do on them. Educative posters were provided and hung strategically on the interior part of the class. Moveable white board was also acquired and placed in the classroom. Document files that go round the number of children in the class were acquired with other learning resources like balls, bowls, flash cards, and cardboards. Two tricycle were also acquired and supplied to the classroom. Figures 3 and 4 present these in a picture forms. The classroom environment is what we tried to make better first because of the position environment occupies in children learning.

This is inline with the citations of New (2000) and Salami (2011) about the position of Reggio emilian teachers who described classroom as the 'third teacher'. In other words, a well prepared environment is capable of enhancing children's development even without human teacher intervention.

Besides the classroom teachers and the parents, a well equipped and organized classroom environment with educative materials is another teacher that can enhance children's development. This also corroborate Oduolowu (2011) that children learning environment matters a lot to their development.

Research question 2: To what extent does UCPPP affect the holistic development of the children in terms of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development?

Socio-emotional development

The daily practices met in the school is so simple- first the children are made to sing 'what are you doing? I am jumping' and the children jump or dance based on the words of the song, within the class; this is followed by academic activities which will be done until recess time. Academic activities start after recess until break time which is around 11 am. This will last for 30 min and academic activities will also continue until 1 pm when the school closes for the day. These practices did not allow much interaction among the children and the interaction between the teacher and the children is too formal. To make matters worse, the children did not understand the language of the teacher (English and Yoruba) and the teacher did not understand that of the children (Hausa). The faces of the children in the class always tell the story with the words 'I don't want to be here' clearly written on them. In other words, the social and emotional development of the children were not cared for.

To address this, we tried to change the daily practices-several songs were composed and the children were encouraged to act while singing. Examples of such new songs are:

1. IMG Ile-iwe mi (2ce)



Figure 3. Caregivers and the children using the tricycle.



Figure 4. A child interacting with a white board.

Ile-iwe dun, o la rinrin.
(Meaning IMG is my school. School is sweet, school is fun)

2. Going to school – don't be late
When in class – do your work
When in school – don't fight
This is how – to be good.

Outdoor activities were made compulsory where every child took part in both cooperative (exploration of the environment) and competitive (sports) activities. The classroom academic activities were made play-based by adopting several child-centred strategies such as hands-on/mind-on activities, activity-based (child-centred and teacher demonstration) and guided discussions. This is in-line with the findings of Aremu and Salami (2012) that child-centred instructional strategies such as activity-based, hands-on/mind-on are more effective than teacher-centred strategies.

The language barrier was handled by co-opting one Primary-6 Hausa pupil in the school to translate whatever we had for the day to the children before the activities

began. He also translated some difficult-to-understand Hausa language of the children for us either in Yoruba or in English. But lots of communication was done using demonstrations. By the second week of the programme, noticeable changes were observed in the children. They were always happy to see our team arriving the school; they developed more confidence to talk to and with us. More child-initiated play activities were observed more within and outside the classroom. According to Aremu and Salami (2012) and Salami and Eighetua (2012) child-centred strategies are capable of enhancing not only socio-emotional development of children but their holistic development.

Physical development

The only noticeable practice we met in this school regarding the physical development of the children was the classroom jumping and dancing while singing in the morning, which is not everyday. But we added to this several indoor and outdoor physical activities such as athletics, football playing, throwing-'n'-catching, tricycl riding etc. Fine motor development was also planned for and activities such as colouring, tracing drawing and writing were used. Through these activities, we discovered the fastest child (female) in the class, the best rider (male), the most skillful football players (Male and female) and class artist (female). According to Adegbamigbe (2011), physical activity programmes can help school children become good athletes.

Intellectual development

The instructional strategies adopted by the preschool teacher met in the school were rote learning, memorisation and direct instruction. This was reflected in the children's (both age-4 and age-5 groups) ability to count rhythmically from 1 to 20, recite the letters of the alphabet letter from A to Z. However, the children could neither recognise the numbers and the letters nor write them. This was the case in other areas of learning such as Social Studies, Basic Science and religion. To address this, several child-centred strategies were adopted in a thematic approach that allowed individualised instruction. The children were attended to instructionally, based on their age levels. Developmentally appropriate practices were adopted to exposed the children to pre-counting and pre-writing activities; recognition, identification and rational counting of numbers and letters; exploration of their environment through indoor and out door activities songs to introduce new concepts like Yoruba Alphabet and so on. It was observed that, despite the language differences, the children were able to acquire some knowledge and the good number of the behavioural objectives were achieved. For instance, the age 5 years

plus were able to count rationally and wrote numerals up to 20 and count rhythmically up to 100; recognised and recited English alphabet, rhythmically recited Yoruba alphabet from 'A' to 'Gb'; they were able to differentiate between living and non-living things, natural and man-made objects in their environment and many more. The age 4years plus children were able to count numbers, recite the alphabet, and recognise some of the numeral and alphabets. Most importantly they were able to sing most of the Yoruba and English songs they were taught. This is in support of Aremu and Salami (2012) and Salami and Egiethua (2012) that child-centred developmentally appropriate activities enhance learning in children than rote/memorization strategies.

Research question 3: What are the effects of UCPPP on the attitude of the preschool teachers towards the education of young children?

The Head teacher of the school warmly accepted the programme when it was introduced to her, although she felt that the programme was the research study for Ph.D. programme of the principal investigator. She also wanted the programme to be extended to primary classes because of the problem of inadequate teachers in the school. But we made her realise the demand was out of the scope of the study but we agreed to render help that we can conveniently accommodate. The class teacher, who was assigned another primary class to teach, saw the programme as a kind of relief to her too demanding responsibilities. The unfortunate thing was that she objected to almost all our practices, but she was amazed by the achievements recorded. She was fond of saying:

'Are you doing all these for them? It is not necessary because they cannot do it'. 'I have done that before but I had to stop'.

'There is no permanent teacher that can do all these because we are poorly remunerated' and all sorts of negative comments.

Because of this, we planned to visit the school the following term to see which of our practices the class teacher adopted. Our finding was that she had re-arranged the class according to the order in which it was before the intervention, with the white board still bearing imprints of our last activity while the tricycles had been packed out of the reach of the children. Individual children files were not touched. The only thing that was not changed was the posters we hanged on the wall. This informed our conclusion that the class teacher had a negative attitude to the practices of the intervention. This attitude must have made the teacher to reverse almost every practice we tried to initiate. Research studies have linked attitude to practices in many ways including that of teachers (Olagunju, 2008; Ade, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study is to transform the public preschools practices by putting the theories into practices in the public primary schools around. After a term (about three months) intervention activities, it was discovered that the programme was a potential panacea to the problems confronting preschool education in Nigeria. The financial challenges that it may present can be solved through innovation. World best practices can be implemented in Nigeria with additional efforts from the university early childhood education scholars.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended for university early childhood education scholars, preschool teachers and the government for better early childhood education practices in the country:

1. Collaboration among university lecturers and students of Early Childhood Education, preschool teachers and the government can make a difference in the learning environment of the pre-school sections in public primary schools. Lecturers should make effort to use this opportunity to make a difference in the public primary schools in their locality.
2. Emphasis should be placed on the implementation of world best practices in preschool education such as the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, multiple intelligence and thematic approach teaching in the training given to pre-service and in-service early childhood education teachers in the universities. This is the only way the holistic development of the Nigerian children can be assured in the nearest future.
3. Conferences and workshops on best early childhood practices should be organised by early childhood educators, NGOs related to Early Childhood Education, development partners such as UNICEF and UNESCO and government through UBEC for the current teachers teaching in the preschool sections of public primary schools in order to improve their practices.

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