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INSTRUCTION-RELATED MENTAL ABUSES OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

Issues of child abuse have become more prevalent in the society even in the Early childhood and Care (ECC) centres. This abuse assumes different shapes and dimensions. Common but often neglected in the advocacy against child abuse is mental abuse of the child through instructional process. The paper examined the National Policy on Education and the National Curriculum of Early Childhood recommended practices for the early childhood level and identifies ways and practices by which caregivers and teachers at the early childhood centres abuse the children mentally through inappropriate curriculum implementation and instruction. Training of caregivers in developmental theories and pedagogy, strict compliance with requirements for approving ECC centres and application of the principles and philosophy of differentiated instruction in the implementation of preschool curriculum content were recommended.

Keywords: Child abuse, Violence against children, Early childhood curriculum, Instructional abuse

Introduction

The concept and understanding of violence and abuse of children have gained wide popularity after the United Nations' (2006) definition of violence in Article 19 of the Convention on the Right of a Child. Prior to this Act, children were seen as developmentally helpless individuals who are to be thought for and who are at the mercy of adults in all things. These adults decide and direct on behaviours as well as ensure and enforce compliance with the so-called "good" or acceptable behaviours. These adult attitudes and practices were founded on traditional

beliefs about molding the child and such philosophical propositions as that put forward by John Locke(1632-1704) that sees the child's mind as “tabula rasa”. NCCA(2004), Malaguzzi, (1993)and Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) present a modern understanding of the child as an individual who is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and connected to adults and other children. who is an intelligent co-constructor of knowledge, a researcher who is actively seeking to make meaning of the world. The cognitive theories have also shown that every child possesses and bears enough knowledge and experiences commensurate with his/her age and exposure. In other words, no child's mind is a clean slate. It means that adult roles are to help the child make use of his/her experiences in understanding his/her environment and to make sense of them.

The school (ECC centres) occupies a strategic position in helping children grapple with the challenges associated with development and learning. This paper reviews some instructional practices which caregivers and teachers adopt in the preschools and identifies those practices that are at variance with best practices recommended in the field.

Violence and Abuse in Early Childhood Context

The term “abuse” is difficult to define from a global dimension because of cultural and religious differences that exist among peoples of the worlds. What is considered as abuse in one culture may be well tolerated as good child upbringing to other people. Thus, traditional and religious orientations determine what is considered as abuse, especially among children. However, the African Network for Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect(ANPPCAN) has attempted a definition that incorporates certain practices hitherto unrecognized as abuse. ANPPCAN (2000) sees child abuse as "intentional, unintentional or well intended acts which endanger the physical, healthy, emotional, moral and educational welfare of children". What this definition uncovers is that there are some well-intended practices, actions and behaviours that are meted out to children which actually abuse them even educationally. A host of these practices abound both at home and in the early childhood educational Centres (ECEC) where the curriculum at this level is implemented.

Curriculum implementation is conceived as interpreting the curriculum, understanding and stating achievable objectives that are appropriate to the characteristics of the learners, designing instructional activities towards achieving the objectives and executing the task of helping learners to learn by carrying out or participating in the designed activities under the guidance and supervision of the teacher/caregiver. Hoagreaves and Fullan (2012) state that the teacher and the learner/ child are at the centre of the curriculum implementation process. Ivowi (2009) lists the teacher as the star in the process of curriculum implementation. It implies that the teacher's knowledge, competence and understanding of the curriculum implementation process and the curriculum itself(Park, 2008) play in the quality of abstraction and implementation of the curriculum as well as the

materials used in the process. Ivowi (2009) notes that while some teachers(caregivers included) are professionally trained and act as such, a great majority are doing more damage than good, while others have no business near the schools. Children left in the hands of the last two categories of teachers/caregivers definitely suffer various forms of mental abuse due to instructional practices that violate policy principles and pedagogies.

The National Policy on Education and the Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum

The intervention of government in the education of pre-school children in Nigeria was necessitated by the lack of uniformity in what is taught at the different ECC centres. This difference is not unconnected with the divergent origin and ownership of preschools in Nigeria. The intervention produced the statement of the purpose of ECE in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 1981) in section 2(1) and re-emphasized in section 2(13) in the 2004 version. The objectives of ECE in Nigeria are to:

- a) effect a smooth transition from home to school,
- b) prepare the child for primary level of education,
- c) provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on farms, in the markets, offices, etc),
- 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, etc,
- f) develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit,
- g) learn good habits, especially good health habits, and
- h) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play.

Laudable as these objectives may be, there are associated curricular, instructional and psychological implications for effective implementation. Children at the pre-school stage fall into the Piaget's sensory-motor stage (18 months -2years), pre-conceptual stage of intelligence (2-4years) and early period of intuitive thinking (4-7years). Each of these stages is marked by distinguishable developmental features which should guide instructional design and implementation. Notable among them are the following:

- 1) Children at the early stage of development operate mainly by unconditioned reflexes with which they maintain dynamic equilibrium with their environment through accommodation and assimilation (Stone, 1966).
- 2) Children at the pre-conceptual stage have problem distinguishing between specific objects and generic ones. A major feature of this stage is the development of language and increase in physical activities of the child due to more muscular strength hence better social development and

interaction but with egocentricism. Vygotsky points out that language has a most significant meaning for the development of human mental activities, directs social interaction and independent solution finding.

- 3) Gradual development of the rudiments of numbers, weight, length, height but without conservation thought.

Instructional development for preschoolers must, therefore, consider the Stimulus-Response (S-R) theory of learning and the associated sub-theories, such as learning by doing, curiosity and interest, enquiry, and learning through stories. Also relevant to curriculum planning and implementation at the preschool level are the cognitive theories of metamorphic change and environment, sub theory of movement and that of learning by perception. Other sub-theories that have implications for curriculum implementation at the pre-school level, as mentioned by Ughamadu (2006) are

- learning through exploration, experimentation and discovery,
- learning through rhymes, songs, asking questions and stories, and
- learning through play

Teaching expecting the pre-school child to learn outside these pedagogic principles or techniques or by negating the fundamental connection between the classroom and these theories and sub-theories may be developmentally inappropriate. It also amounts to cognitive/mental abuse of the pre-school child.

Analysis of the National Early Childhood Curriculum for 0-5 years in Nigeria

Efforts to develop an acceptable ECC curriculum in Nigeria started after the Child Rights Act in 2004. It included the search for curriculum that will emphasize holistic development of the child. The present National ECC Curriculum for ages 0-5 years produced by Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in partnership with UNICEF and state and local government stakeholders infused local peculiarities in childcare practices as well as cultural diversities among Nigerians to produce an integrated curriculum in which the concepts are arranged thematically. The curriculum divides this level of education into two cohorts (0 to 3 years and 3 to 5 years). The curriculum of each of these cohorts contains eight themes, as listed below:

- Physical development
- Affective development
- Cognitive development
- Food and nutrition
- Health
- Water and environmental sanitation
- Safety measures
- Protection issues

Each of these thematic areas have topics and recommends contents, activities and actions or objectives expected of parents, caregivers and pre-school children as well as necessary caring/ learning materials for adequate implementation of the curriculum.

Also of high importance in the implementation of the ECD curriculum is the emphasis on the use of the language of the immediate environment as the language of instruction. The implication of this to the child and for national development is the presumption that the child should become citizens of their environment before being taught global issues and languages. Teachers' expert knowledge in curriculum implementation is demonstrated when inert curriculum is translated into operational curriculum through adequate abstraction of content, learning experiences to achieve operationally stated objectives during the preparation of lesson notes and lesson plans, and the execution of the plans using various teaching skills, such as reinforcement and motivational strategies in a child-friendly environment (Okoro, 2010). This is the process of translating curricular expectations to reality. If this task is not performed adequately, the expectations of the curriculum will not be met.

Curriculum Implementation Practices in ECC centres

Because of the multifaceted origin of preschools in Nigeria and the private /missionary ownership structure (Government intervention is but recent), the curriculum and administrative structure of preschools have been without uniformity. Each school/care centre operated an elitist curriculum with the intention of impressing parents and as a way of expressing quality and high standards. These competitive structures have resulted in certain practices that are developmentally inappropriate in curriculum development in preschools. In the context of school-friendly practices, they could be classified as inimical to holistic development of children as well as contribute to mental violence on preschool children.

Some of them include:

1. conventional classroom arrangement with "teacher" facing the pupils and little room for movement for both teacher and children;
2. using foreign languages (English and French) as media for communication as means of boosting the image of the school without consideration for the developmental challenges being faced by the child;
3. teaching children to be involved in academic and cognitive learning beyond their ages and capacity, for example, teaching three- year-olds to learn number 1 to 100 or to write;
4. teaching formal mathematics and literacy skills; note that Kapusnick and Hauslein, (2001) aver that children get frustrated when they are taught too difficult concepts developmentally above them;
5. using standardized testing to assess learning;

6. using computers and other technologies in teaching and learning in pre-schools;
7. teaching by telling and thus encouraging rote and memorization;
8. keeping children in school for 'after-school -lessons' beyond normal school period;
9. prohibiting 'noise and interaction as a way of controlling class thus jeopardizing language and communication development;
10. asking children to put their heads on the tables to maintain silence
11. absence of sleep arrangement at certain times during school to relax their brains;
12. indoctrination through certain stories, rhymes, songs and stories which may have social and educational implications during future development;
13. graduating/admitting children less than primary school age into primary schools;
14. poor use of visuals, real things/ objects and simple hands-on activities in helping children learn certain topics in health and even numeracy;

Pre-school teachers are key players in young children education. They play specialized and crucial roles in effective implementation of early childhood curriculum. These roles include child guidance and discipline, respecting cultural diversity, adopting the appropriate methods of teaching and learning, encouraging self-dependence (McDonnell, 1999 in Ntumi (2016)); establishing reciprocal relationship with families and other teachers (Lundin, 2000); creating a caring community of learners and teaching to enhance development and learning in the classroom (NAEYC, 2005).

Implementing Curriculum at the Early Years: The Way Forward

The curriculum for children in pre-school focuses basically on psychosocial, physical, moral and cognitive development. There is need to build the competence and knowledge of the caregivers in the areas of developmental psychology, associated learning theories and pedagogy for early years education. This will enable them to correctly abstract, determine, and organize activities that will lead the children to develop in the right direction both physically and mentally. Ignorantly teaching too difficult concepts may have serious implications for learning in later life such as fear of learning, loss of interest, fear of failure, and, consequently, fear of schooling. Learning at this stage should be more of fun and play.

Fuelled by parental calls for caregivers to teach literacy and numeracy (even beyond the level developmentally appropriate for the children), preschools have tended to struggle to meet the demands without consideration of the curriculum and the psychology of the children. Caregivers and teachers at the preschool level should differentiate instruction along children's individual differences. Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching and learning in which the children's differences in readiness, interests, and profiles are

recognized, understood and utilized in planning and delivering instruction (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Purcell (2007) recommends that teachers at the preschool could differentiate instruction by

1. being sensitive to the developmental differences of the children since each child develops in specific unique ways and rate;
2. Monitoring each child's progress so as to modify instruction to suit each specific need;
3. Basing instruction on established programme goals, child assessment and observed peculiarities;
4. teaching and making them perform activities more in small flexible groups and individually instead of face- to- face whole class session;
5. teaching them within their zone of proximal development (ZPD), as espoused by Vygotsky (1978);
6. Exciting children with the materials and activities by providing a wide range of materials to accommodate each student's unique readiness, interests, and learning styles; and
7. Making use of valid assessment data to take decisions about each child's learning needs.

Appropriate use of methods, techniques and materials, such as toys and games, in teaching children at the early years is very essential. Teachers and caregivers' expertise should be directed towards creating meaningful play, songs and activities for learning concepts at the early years.

There is also the need to place emphasis on the availability of standard provision for play, making sand molds and open environment for exploration of nature. Schools/care centres for the early years should, therefore, be adequately decorated with pictures, flowers in the compound and large space to enhance mobility.

The ECC centre should be an epitome of child-friendliness since anything on the contrary impinges on children's emotional and psychological health (Danesy & Busari, 2005).

Conclusion

The paper looked at the concept of abuse and curriculum implementation as well as certain instructional practices often found in the ECC centres which are at variance with curricular expectations of the Nigerian Curriculum for Early Childhood. An analysis of the curriculum exposed that the ECC curriculum expects that caregivers possess knowledge and competencies that will enable them to implement the curriculum as recommended by the National Policy on Education. However, poor training, outright use of quacks, personal aggrandizement, and inability to translate objectives into learning activities may be responsible for instruction-related abuses often noticed in preschool. While other forms of abuses are easily noticed and advocacy for them developed,

instruction-related abuses of the preschool child goes on unnoticed even with its very adverse consequences.

Recommendations

This paper recommends as follows:

1. The supervising bodies, ministries and Early Childhood Association of Nigeria should intensify supervision of ECC centres to monitor the implementation of the curriculum in conformity with best practices in addition to facilities and infrastructure availability.
2. Caregivers ,proprietors and managers of ECC centres should be adequately trained for the jobs and services they provide. The child and national interest should override personal and profiteering in the implementation of ECC curriculum.
3. Only qualified ECCE graduates should work at ECC centres
4. There should be a template for physical, material and personnel requirements for approval of ECC centres.
5. Professionalism should be applied in determining how much of content is needed by a child
6. Caregivers and teachers at the early childhood level should keep abreast of the principles of differentiated instruction to enhance the appropriateness of their curriculum delivery.

If these recommendations are implemented, they will contribute to reducing instructional abuse and violence in early childhood centres.

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