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EDUCATION, CARE AND WELLBEING OF CHILDREN IN PRE-SCHOOLS AS A CORRELATE FOR EMPOWERMENT AND CHANGE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY.

Abstract:

Learning is closely intertwined with wellbeing. The school environment, as a context of learning, has been found to play an important role in children's social, emotional and behavioral development (Gutman and Feinstein, 2008). It has been observed by many scholars that "high-quality early education produces long-lasting benefits" (Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2000; National Research Council 2001; Reynolds et al. 2001; Campbell et al. 2002). With this evidence, the Nigerian federal, state, and local decision makers are asking critical questions about young children's education. What should children be taught in the early years from birth through age eight? How would we know if they are developing well and learning what we want them to learn? And how can we decide whether programs for children from infancy through the primary grades are doing a good job? Are the school environment and feeding culture addressing children's wellbeing in school? Answers to these questions about early childhood education curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation— are the foundation statement of this paper which adopted the descriptive survey design. This paper is therefore interested in investigating the Effect of Early Childhood Care Education and Wellbeing as a Correlate for Empowerment and Change in the Nigerian Society. The study amongst other things recommends that victimization and bullying should not be encouraged in pre-school; schools should be well funded and teachers should be appropriately trained. Equally, schools should provide balanced mid-day meals to children to cater for malnourishment wherever applicable. This study is noteworthy because it advocates spending on children's education as an economic investment in a society's future.

Keywords:

Children; Education; Early Childhood Curriculum; program evaluation; Victimization; Bullying; Empowerment and Change.

JEL Classification: A31

Introduction

The most important years of learning begin at birth. During these early years, humans are capable of absorbing more information than later in life. The brain grows most rapidly in the early years. Since time immemorial, education is estimated as the right road to progress and prosperity. Different educationists' thoughts from both Eastern and Western side have explained the term 'education' according to the need of the hour. Various educationists have given their views on education.

WHAT IS EDUCATION

Education these days has come to mean either "teaching" or "the process of acquiring knowledge." Education in the broadest sense of the term is meant to aid the human being in his/her pursuit of wholeness. Wholeness implies the harmonious development of all the potentialities God has given to a human in terms of: the physical, mental, moral (spiritual), and social faculties, or dimensions of life.

Education is a systematic process through which a child or an adult acquires knowledge, experience, skill and sound attitude. It makes an individual civilized, refined, cultured and educated. For a civilized and socialized society, education is the only means. Its goal is to make an individual perfect. Every society gives importance to education because it is a panacea for all development. It is the key to solve the various problems of life (Parankimalil, J. 2012).

By educating a child, the society attempt to give him some desirable knowledge, understanding, skills, interests, attitudes and critical 'thinking. He develops some understanding about the deeper things in life, the complex human relations, and the cause and effect relationship and so on. He gets some skills in writing, speaking, calculating, drawing, operating some equipment etc. He develops some interests in and attitudes towards social work, democratic living, co-operative management and so on.

The Preschool

A preschool also known as: crèche, nursery school, or kindergarten is an educational establishment offering early childhood education to children between the ages of three and five, or seven, prior to the commencement of compulsory education at primary school. It may be privately operated or government-run in which case the costs may be subsidized. Preschool education, like all other forms of education, is intended to transmit important cultural values of the society to children.

As a result, different cultures make different choices about preschool education. Despite the variations, there are a few common themes. Most significantly, preschool is universally expected to increase the young child's ability to perform basic self-care tasks such as dressing, feeding, and toileting. Similarly, in many preschools, development of social skills and having a sense of group belonging by participating in group activities are major goals that are highly valued.

Preschool Education Main Themes

The areas of development that are typically offered in pre-schools are:

- Personal, social, economic and emotional development

- Communication, (including sign language), talking and listening
- World knowledge and understanding
- Creative and aesthetic development
- Mathematical awareness
- Physical development
- Physical health
- Play
- Teamwork
- Self-help skills
- Social skills
- Scientific thinking
- Literacy

Concept of wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing is difficult to pin down. It has been described as ‘intangible, difficult to define and even harder to measure’ (Thomas, 2009, p11). Concepts such as ‘wellbeing’, ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘quality of life’ are often used interchangeably, and they incorporate both **objective**- observable and **subjective** indicators based on individuals’ self reports of aspects of a person’s life – both observable facts (such as household income, family structure, educational achievement, health status) and an individual’s own feelings about these things and their life in general. In other words, wellbeing can be understood both in relation to objective measures, such as household income, educational resources and health status; and subjective indicators such as happiness, perceptions of quality of life and life satisfaction.

Wellbeing is generally understood as the quality of people’s lives (Rees et al, 2010). It is a dynamic state that is enhanced when people can fulfill their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society. It is understood both in relation to objective measures, such as household income, educational resources and health status; and subjective indicators such as happiness, perceptions of quality of life and life satisfaction.

Child Well-being

Child well-being measures the quality of children’s lives. As simple as the concept sounds, there is no unique, universally accepted way of actually measuring child well-being that emerges from the academic literature. Child well-being is defined as “a multi-dimensional construct incorporating mental/psychological, physical and social dimensions” (Columbo, cited in Pollard and Lee, 2003, p. 65).

Ben-Arieh and Fronen (2007) have offered the following definition, also indicators-based of child well-being. “Child well-being encompasses quality of life of children in a broad sense. It refers to a child’s economic conditions, peer relations, political rights, and opportunities

for development. Most studies focus on certain aspects of children's well-being, often emphasizing social and cultural variations. Thus, any attempts to grasp child well-being in its entirety must use indicators on a variety of aspects of well-being."

Children's well-being and school experiences are closely intertwined. The school environment, as a context of learning and education, also has an important role in children's outcomes. Evidence suggests that children's school experiences are associated with their social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes as well as health (Sorhaindo, 2006).

Two main Elements of Well-being

The theme of Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy. Well-being focuses on developing as a person. It has two main elements:

1. **Psychological well-being** (including feeling and thinking). Children's relationships and interactions with their families and communities contribute significantly to their sense of well-being. Children need to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included in societal development. They also need to respect themselves, others, and their environment. They become positive about themselves and their learning when adults value them for who they are and when they promote warm and supportive relationships with them. Expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances children's sense of well-being. Life is full of challenges and struggles. Therefore, being flexible and having a positive outlook on learning and on life is crucial. All these experiences help children to become resilient and resourceful and to learn to cope with change and situations in which things go wrong.
2. **Physical well-being** is important for learning and development as this enables children to explore, to investigate, and to challenge themselves in the environment. A growing awareness of their bodies and abilities is also part of this.

Child well-being is often associated with developmental transitions between different stages in life. "Often, especially among young children, the standards for development are based on a preferred adolescent or adult outcome, implying the need to prepare children for their transition into later stages in life or to monitor their developmental process.

From the foregoing, Child well-being can be sum up as the realization of children's rights and the fulfillment of opportunities for every child to be all he/she can be in life. The degree to which this is achieved can be measured in terms of positive child outcomes, whereas negative outcomes and deprivation point to the denial of children's rights.

Dimensions of wellbeing

In this framework there are five dimensions to wellbeing that overlap and interconnect with each other: cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual. Collectively these dimensions provide learners with resilience and confidence in their ability to influence their world. In their work on the foundations of wellbeing for UNESCO, Pollard and Davidson (2001) expand on some of the dimensions and their various aspects.

- **Cognitive** aspects include information processing, memory, curiosity, mastery, motivation, persistence, thinking and intelligence.
- **Emotional** aspects are closely linked with social aspects and include emotional development and control, coping, autonomy, positive self-development, trust and attachment.
- **Physical** aspects include nutrition, physical activity, physical safety, preventive health care, reproductive health and substance abuse.
- **Social** aspects include parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, peer relationships, positive social behavior, empathy and sympathy.
- **Spiritual** aspects include beliefs, values, morals and ethics; a sense of meaning and purpose; altruism; and a sense of connectedness to something larger than oneself.

Selecting child well-being dimensions and indicators

This relates to the rationale for selecting the child well-being dimensions and indicators to consider in relation to child policy choices

The five dimensions

The dimensions of child well-being have been identified here to cover the major aspects of children's lives and they are stated as follows:

1. Material well-being and deprivation,
2. housing and the environment,
3. education and quality of school life,
4. health, and
5. risk behaviors.

Each dimension has roots in the international standards agreed for children in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). All cross-country research uses the UNCRC as a defining text in determining the framework in comparative child well-being across the OECD.

The link between education and wellbeing

Learning is closely intertwined with wellbeing. Wellbeing is integral to the learning process. A learner will engage readily with learning when in an optimum state of wellbeing. The school environment, as a context of learning, has been found to play an important role in children's social, emotional and behavioral wellbeing (Gutman and Feinstein, 2008). The positive association between learning and wellbeing has also been shown to be longitudinal – predicting change from childhood to adolescence. Children's learning and enjoyment in primary school predicts their later wellbeing in secondary school, with some gender differences. According to Gutman et al, (2010) for boys, learning in primary school has the strongest influence on behavioral aspects of their later wellbeing, whereas for girls it is more predictive of social wellbeing.

A strong sense of wellbeing is fundamentally connected to children's sense of *belonging, being* and *becoming*. When children feel well, happy, secure and socially successful they are able to fully participate in, and learn from, the daily routines, play, interactions and experiences in their early childhood setting.

Settings that promote children's wellbeing clearly include a focus on basic practices such as supervising children adequately, ensuring the safety of equipment and the environment, good hygiene and safe sleep procedures, managing illness and injuries effectively and meeting children's nutritional needs. They also allow flexibility to respond to individual needs.

Internationally, there has been substantial interest in developing a set of indicators which can be used to monitor childhood wellbeing across countries and over time (UNICEF (2007). For instance, The European Commission (2008) and the Office for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2009) have all been active in this area, and the level of interest is indicated by the fact that there is now an International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) which holds annual conferences and publishes an academic journal, *Child Indicators Research*.

Educational Right of the child

The United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC) states that each child has the right to education, and that this right should be developed on the basis of equal opportunity (art. 28). The UNCRC also commits signatory countries to providing an education system to develop the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (art. 29a). Ensuring the highest possible levels of educational achievement for all children addresses this commitment. Although family factors are predominantly associated with variation in educational achievement in most countries, there are a number of intervention points for governments to address both average educational achievement and educational inequality.

Material well-being and deprivation

The children's rights outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) commit governments to ensuring that children have a standard of living adequate to ensure physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. To this end, governments are not only committed to supplementing the family income, but "in case of need" to provide material assistance (UNCRC art. 27). Further parts of the convention define the right of children to access diverse material for their development, such as educational items, like children's books and toys (art. 17).

In some European countries, three indicators are chosen to measure the material well-being of children.

- a. The first is the average disposable income in families with children under age 18 (median family income would have been more desirable than average family income as a measure, but was not available).
- b. The second is a relative poverty rate for children under 18.
- c. The third is the proportion of 15-year-old children deprived of the basic necessities for education relevant to school performance.

All three indicators are child-centered, in that the child is the unit of analysis. However, in the case of both the disposable income and poverty measures, it is the family income that is attributed to the individual child. Ideally, it is the material living standards of the child, rather than that of his or her family, which is of interest. In the case of the educational items, the child is asked directly about his or her material situation. This indicator is thus more strongly child-focused than the income and poverty measures. The material well-being indicators are comparatively up-to-date. Income and poverty data come from national household surveys from 2005 or thereabouts.

Bradshaw, J. (2009) asserted that, European Countries have cash transfer policies for families with children, providing a short causal chain for reducing income poverty for families with children. In addition, the design of the tax-benefit system and work-related incentives, and the provision of child care and active labour market policies in Europe provide other direct routes for governments to influence parental employment, which is in turn strongly related to child poverty. As for educational items, in many cases these can be supplied in schools, or offset in other ways through the school environment, again providing a short causal chain for public policy intervention.

OECD indicators on the material well-being dimension for children are excellent. Complementary equity and efficiency indicators are covered by including average family income as a measure of efficiency and child poverty as a measure of equity. For instance, there are indicators to identify how countries achieve good incomes for families with children overall, or to identify children in families at the lower end of the income distribution. Income and poverty matter for children's current well-being, but they also affect the amount of resources parents have available to invest in the futures of their children, especially their educational futures. The educational items may reflect child well-being in terms of social inclusion in school and peer environments. But more importantly, they give an indication of the future educational development of the child and the degree of parental support for longer-term child outcomes. Contrarily, all standard indicators are lacking in Nigeria educational policy for child wellbeing.

The Nigerian case

Schools provide an important environment for children to prepare for adult life, both socially and economically. Children's wellbeing is "central to everything that happens to pupils at school. School environments are strongly influenced by government policy. In Nigeria for instance, it is expected that by the time a child reaches age 15, a considerable amount of government investment must have been spent on the child's education. There is a very short chain of causal logic from government educational policy to child educational outcomes. In terms of the policy amenability, Nigeria has made policy decisions about the age of compulsory school completion and about the provision of basic-compulsory

education and training and active labour market policies regarding children and youth. However, these policy decisions are yet to be fulfilled holistically as many children are still out of school, are not properly fed and lack adequate wellbeing.

Since it has been established that wellbeing and achievement are linked, a nation's (Nigeria) progress, achievements and development hinges on her ability to her citizens starting with the children. Consequently, Nigerian government policy framework and approaches need to be better structured, focused and delivered consistently to make an impact on children's educational well-being.

Conclusion

Promoting children's health and safety and ensuring their total wellbeing—including their physical and psychological welfare—requires that educators think critically about the routines, environment and relationships in their setting. In particular, educators need to get to know each child and their life circumstances so that they use these understandings in their work. Educators use this knowledge to provide each child with a sense of place and importance within their setting, and they support children to build upon their current knowledge, skills and abilities as they gain increasing independence in caring for their own and others' welfare.

Improvement in early childhood care and development means an improvement in other education programs that are integrated with it such as Maternal and Child Health (with attendant reduction in maternal and infant mortality).

Recommendations

- **Investing in Early Childhood Education:** With the current shift in emphasis in the United Nations programming from Economic Development to Human Development, it is clear that child development should be the starting point of our intervention in human development. The social and economic payoff is significant. Children whose early life development receives support are more productive in later life. They repeat classes less often in primary school, they complete primary school more often, they require less remedial programmes and they are less susceptible to truancy and criminal tendencies (UNICEF, 1998; Mwaura, 2010). Therefore, investing in Early Childhood Education (ECE) appears to be the starting point for progress and change.
- **Investing in pre-school facilitates:** facilitate the attainment of social and gender equity. By providing a robust base from which children from deprived backgrounds, children with special needs, girls and others who encounter discrimination can draw on in later life.
- **Early life intervention policies:** Early life intervention enables the child to bond not only with his/her parents but provides an important point of entry into the child's community. This of course prepares the ground for children social mobilization, civic engagement, participation, patriotism etc thus suggesting that National Orientation is best done in the early years when attitudes, dispositions and tendencies are still malleable.

- Pre- school centers can be used as vehicles for fostering integration and harmony among ethnically and religiously diverse groups as children quickly learn to accommodate one another without prejudice to these factors as well as others like physical challenges.
- Schools should be well funded and teachers should be appropriately trained.
- Schools should provide balanced mid-day meals to children to cater for malnourishment wherever applicable.
- The child rights policy should be implemented.
- Victimization and bullying should not be encouraged in pre- schools.

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Definition of Terms /Key words

1. **Educators:** *All people working with children and students in care and education settings.*
2. **Families:** *includes parents, caregivers and extended family members.*
3. **Learners:** *Children and students from newborns to adults re-entering education.*
4. **Children:** are persons below the age of 18 years.
5. **Education:** can be defined as the process of transmitting knowledge to the young once in the society. It can also be referred to as *any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind* of the receiver.
6. **Pre- School Centers:** A preschool also known as nursery school, or kindergarten is an educational establishment offering early childhood education to children between the ages of three and five, or seven, prior to the commencement of compulsory education at primary school.
7. **Child Well-Being:** Child well-being measures the quality of children's lives.
8. **Child wellbeing standards:** these are Statements that describe expectations for the learning and development of young children.