

INTEGRATING COUNSELLING INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THE BENEFITS, CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper focused on the role of the professional counsellors in early childhood education. It is observed that little or no attention has been given to this level of education in Nigerian school system until recently, particularly with the enactment of the 2013 NPE. The involvement of professional counsellors at this cadre of education could help young learners to achieve more guided educational successes as they navigate the other levels of education. In pursuit of this goal, this paper further examine some challenges and benefits of early childhood education which could be ameliorated and facilitated respectively by guidance and counselling. The paper argued that appropriate counselling interventions at an early stage of young learners could contribute to their successful education as well as maximize their future well being. In this regard, the paper put forward multilateral counselling interventions at five levels. They include counsellor's collaboration with school proprietor, counsellor's partnership with preschool teachers, counsellor's interface with parents, counsellor's interface with young learners and Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) consultation with government. It is therefore, recommended that guidance and counselling should be an integral component of early child education in Nigeria as a means of enhancing the attainment of its educational objectives.*

KEYWORD: Integrating, Counselling, Early Childhood Education.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education has become a fully recognized component of the organic structure of Nigerian education, by the provisions of the National policy on education (2013). This level of education, as the name implies covers the formal education experiences of children ranging from ages one to six years. It is thus the foundation of the formal education journey of the child that would take him to higher levels. Considering the fact that education is about the total development of the learner, it is conceivable that every effort must be made to ensure that its organization and implementation is conducted to optimize the development of the child, right from this early beginning of his contact with formal education. Basically, formal education consists of both instructional and non-instructional experiences which contribute to the effective education of the child. It is observable that instructional experiences and perhaps aspects of non-instructional experiences feature in early childhood education, while the counselling services component do not seem to be eminently integrated into the programme.

In the same vein, it is observed that the operationalization of the Montessori education in Nigeria does not seem to integrate counselling services, in spite of the recognition accorded counselling services by NPE. The thesis of this paper is that since counselling services are beneficial to other levels of education, its integration into the early childhood education programme would optimize the actualization of the goals of early childhood education. This

paper discusses the role of counselling services in early childhood education and how it could be actualized in the Nigerian system.

The following sub-headings would be discussed in addressing this topic:

1. What is Early Childhood Education?
2. What are the challenges and benefits of Early Childhood Education?
3. A peep into the role of counsellors in Early Childhood Education.

What is Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is the pre-school education given to children who are between the ages of two and half or three to six years. Young children are assisted to develop emotionally, socially and physically. Educationists have referred to early childhood education as crèche, kindergarten, pre-school, nursery school, day care etc. many scholars have variously defined early childhood education.

Obinaju (2004) described early childhood education as the education or training given to a child from birth to entering the primary school. For Obinaju, early childhood education starts from a period when the child is totally dependent on the parents, especially the mother, for survival and satisfaction of needs to a period he can survive on his own. Ojeme (2014) opined that this level of education is the most vulnerable stages of the total process of education. She stated further that the cadre of education is aimed at giving children an academic head start as well as prepare them for primary school education. Maduewesi, (1999) views early childhood education as the exposure of young children, from age three, through play-like activities to mental, social and physical learning, in a semi-formal setting until they attained the age of government approved for the commencement of formal learning or school. In some cases, however, the responsibility of teaching and bringing up children from birth to formal school age of five years, lie solely on parents and relatives. This is the practice in some places till date. Wordu, Wosowei and Achinihi (2015) asserted that the laying of a sound foundation for young children in the early years, would greatly impact positively on the future of the Nigerian society.

The importance of early childhood education has been emphasized in the National Policy on Education NPE (2013) education. The Federal Government of Nigeria, highlighted the objectives of early childhood education to be achieved as follows:

1. effect a smooth transition from the home to the school
2. preparing the child for the next level of education, which is the primary level of education.
3. provide adequate care and supervision for the child while his or her parents are at work.
4. inculcating social norms, the spirit of enquiry and creativity in the child through playing with toys and exploring nature and the environment.
5. developing a sense of cooperation and team spirit in the child.
6. teaching the child the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc.

7. assisting the child to learn healthy habits.

The outlined objectives above, point out the relevance of early childhood education. Also, aligning with the above opinion, Schweinhart (2007) and Sparling, Ramey & Ramey (2007) stated that early gains in school readiness due to early childhood education would have lasting positive economic and social impacts on the child's development. For Bowman, Donovan, and Burns (2001), early childhood is a period for the development of the mental functions of children including their abilities and skills in language, motor skills, psycho-social, cognitive and learning.

From the foregoing, the relevance of early child education cannot be over emphasized. Early childhood education has a direct effect on the overall development of the child and on the adult he or she will become.

What are the Challenges and Benefits of Early Childhood Education?

Like any other level of education, early childhood education is not without its teething problems and other challenges militating against the actualization of its objectives, in spite of the Federal Government recognition of early childhood education.

There are several challenges that constrain early Childhood Education. The following are keys.

1. Human and material Resources:

Education authorities in Nigeria are evidently more concerned with the wellbeing of upper basic education or secondary schools. Consequently investment in Early Childhood Education is minimal or neglected. Thomas (2016), stated that lack of resources arise from poor funding at the most fundamental level. The resultant effect is that this level education fundamentally does not have what it needs in human and material resources evidently manifested in terms of professionally untrained teachers and poor learning environment.

2. Insufficient Availability of Professionally Trained Teachers:

Early childhood education is unique in its requirement of trained teachers. Apart from the chronic apathy of prospective teachers in opting for training for this level of education, there is also the limited availability of training institutions. Wordu, Wosowei and Achinihi (2015) asserted that most of the private nursery school proprietors operate the schools as business centre with the aim of maximizing profits. According to them, many of these schools employ Nigeria certificate in Education (NCE) holders, secondary school dropout and learners who have no knowledge of child psychology to teach. This is contrary to the Policy of the Federal Government NPE (1981) and the subsequent editions of 1998, 2004 and 2013, which emphasized the training of teachers, including the pre-primary school teachers, to ensure quality education at all levels. Obiweluzor and Owie (2016) asserted that there is a gap between the quality of teachers and the practice of early childhood education. The consequence is that early childhood schools suffer severe dearth of professionally qualified teachers.

3. Dearth of Early Childhood Counselling Services:

It is common knowledge that the services of guidance Counsellors are not engaged in pre-nursery and nursery schools in many Nigerian schools. Counsellors are usually

trained for higher level of education and perhaps ill-prepared for the intricate skills required for effective early childhood education counselling services. Properly institutionalized, Guidance counselling services would have been useful also to the care-givers and parents of children with disabilities.

4. Early Childhood Education Curriculum:

As with the teachers, so is the thin availability of experts in designing the curriculum for Early Childhood Education. Denga (1993) stated that there should be articulated curriculum for Early Childhood Education, parents and caregivers. He observed that pre-primary schools, currently do not operate uniform curriculum but rather curriculum are developed by proprietors, borrowing ideas from one another. This void or vacuum needs to be quickly addressed.

5. Unhealthy Locations of School:

Another challenge of Early Childhood Education is the Location of schools. Educational Learning environment should be located in places that are conducive for effective teaching and learning. Hugu (1992) observed that schools are located in noisy areas, close to the roads, industries, markets, bakeries, church premises, residential-quarters and make shift buildings. All these are potential hindrances to the actualization of education goals.

Benefits of Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is very crucial to the effective educational development of the child. As stated by Okoye (2002), early childhood education, goes a long way to influence the adult personality features that will manifest later in life as well as capacity to cope with subsequent educational development. The benefit of Early Childhood Education as outlined by Izuchi (2006), Thomas (2016), Ojeme (2014) and Wordu, Wosowei and Achinihi (2015), amongst others, can be summarized as follows:

Social Benefits:

- a. **Socialization:** Early childhood education would enable children form bonds of friendship. It would encourage interaction among the children, thereby helping them to overcome shyness and gain self-confidence.
- b. **Cooperation:** In early childhood education, children from the ages of three to six coexist in the same educational environment. The benefit of this multi-age grouping or setting, is that the younger children, have older models they can imitate and be motivated by their learning activities and attitudes. They learn how to share, cooperate, to take their turns and to persevere in their activities. The older children, on the other hand, learn to develop tolerance, care and the spirit of oneness. They also learn to assist the younger children with their learning activities while consolidating their own learning.
- c. **Teamwork:** Early Childhood Education provides opportunity for a child to be actively involved in teamwork. This will enable the child to acquire social skills and make him or her more employable.

Educational Benefits:

- a. **Encouraging Holistic Development:** Another benefit of early childhood education is that the approach encourages the building of a strong foundation for the development of a child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional domain, which will prepare the child for a life time. Children are usually curious to learn at this level. Thomas (2016) opined that mathematics is best learnt during this period, when the brain is rapidly developing. She stated further that mathematics in early childhood helps children to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills.
- b. **Concentration:** In Early childhood Education, children learn to develop critical life skill of concentration, through their active participation in group activities in pre-schools. They learn to balance zeal with the ability to listen, follow directions, attend to tasks etc.

Psychological Benefits:

- a. **Enthusiasm for Lifelong Learning:** At this level of education, children are very enthusiastic to develop love for education, reading, learning, discovery, nature etc. All of these desires find its root in pre-school.
- b. **Resilience:** In early childhood education, children develop resilience skills. They may experience bruises or losing a game from time to time and this does not stop them from future participation. In this way, children learn to build foundation for coping strategies or greater challenges in life.
- c. **Patience:** By learning to wait and take their turns, children are able to acquire skills for patience, which is very essential in conflict resolution or management.
- d. **Confidence and Self-esteem:** Through interactions with other children and teachers, the children will develop positive and healthy perception of themselves. This will enable them approach situations and problems confidently throughout their lives.

Cultural Benefits:

- a. **Respect:** At this level of education, children are taught the value of respect. They are taught how to respect their senior and elders. They are also taught the way of life that will cling to them in some fashion throughout life.
- b. **Exposure to Diversity:** In early childhood education, children are made to understand that every child has his or her unique characteristics, which make the child different from another in their culture, beliefs and ethnicity.

From the foregoing, it is conceivable that the benefits of early childhood education are of great relevance to the child's development if properly guided at the early stage of life.

A peep into The Role of Counsellors in Early Childhood Education

The relevance of early childhood education, warrant the holistic intervention of all stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process of younger children.

In what ways, therefore, can the counsellor's interventions contribute to the successful education of young children, in order to maximize their future wellbeing? This question would be addressed as follows:

- i. School counsellor's collaboration with school proprietor.
- ii. School counsellor's partnership with preschool teachers.
- iii. School counsellor's interface with parents.
- iv. Counsellor's interface with young learners.
- v. Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) consultation with Government for early childhood education.

School Counsellor's Collaboration with School Proprietors:

The school proprietor and school counsellor are two key role actors in the school system. The effective performance of their statutory roles is significant to the success of the education mission of young children, which both parties are committed to accomplish. It is expected therefore, that the counsellor must collaborate with the proprietor who is the authority head. This would in turn pay dividend to the counsellor in terms of elicitation of enhanced capacity cooperation to carry out his or her duties in the preschool. By complimenting the work of the proprietor, it is to be expected that a more robust learning climate would ensue, for the benefits of the young children.

Ways, in which the school counsellor could collaborate with school proprietor to promote effective learning of young children, include;

- a. Persuading school proprietors and government, to provide a safe and orderly learning environment for the young children and work tools for teachers and the counsellor, to effectively discharge their legitimate duties.
- b. To inject more fund into the preschools in order to promote learning activities.
- c. To ensure that qualified teachers are recruited and
- d. To ensure that teachers are in their classes and using the appropriate methods of teaching young children.

School Counsellor's Partnership with Preschool Teachers

It is well known that, the teachers' inputs remain the most important in all the variables that are necessary for effective learning and education of young children. The key to successful learning depends on the effectiveness of the teachers. Omorogiuwa (2012) posited that teachers are powerful instruments for promoting learning at all levels. Also, Afe (1995) has argued that the love, dedication and devotion of the teacher towards their teaching subjects and knowledge, could promote effective learning in the classroom.

The poor attitude of some teachers to work could negatively impact on a child's development and deter effective learning in the classroom. This being the case, the school counsellor could be helpful in assisting the teacher to modify his or her negative approach, demeanor and attitude so as to create a safe and encouraging classroom climate for effective learning.

The school counsellor could work with teachers to:

- a. Promote positive teacher-children relationship. This is also the view of Thompson (1998) who stated that the most powerful weapon available to preschool teachers, who want to foster favourable learning climate is a positive relationship with their learners.
- b. Ensure teachers work out strategies for promoting effective learning such as communicating positive expectations, correcting children in a constructive way, developing positive classroom pride, be more caring and to treat all children equitably.
- c. Assist children with special needs for necessary interventions. Early recognition and response to these deficiencies could have a major impact on the child's success in school.
- d. Persuade teachers to apply appropriate motivational tools that would promote effective learning. And to play the role of mother and father or a friend to the young learners. This will create a warm and friendly atmosphere which could enhance effective learning in the preschools.
- e. Encourage teachers to refer young learners with learning difficulties to visit the counsellor for possible intervention and assistance.

School Counsellor's Interface with Parents

School counsellors could go the extra mile of consultation with young learners' parents either by going to their homes or inviting their parents to a meeting-

- a. To give parents an update of their children's progress in school.
- b. Encourage parents to give maximum financial support to their children by paying school fees on time, meeting the basic needs such as elementary books, playing toys, uniforms etc.
- c. Persuade parents to ensure that the children are regular and punctual at school.
- d. Make parents to see the need to map out time on a routine basis for their children's private study and to do all assignments given to them.
- e. Encourage parents to feed their children with balanced diets, so as to enhance mental development and stability.

Counsellor's Interface with young Learners:

The relevance of the work of the school counsellor is indisputable to the success of the preschool system. In addition to working with those significant people in the lives of children, teachers, administrators, family members and people in the community, the counsellor, as summarized by Ojeme (2012) should also carry out the following duties, which would help to facilitate young children's learning:

- a. The school counsellor should regularly set aside quality time for monitoring of young children, in order to identify any child that is behaving abnormally for prompt intervention.

- b. The counsellor should assist the young learners with counselling needs to proffer possible solutions to their problems by eliciting the client's personal-social information, which would serve as a useful data for counselling.
- c. The counsellor should have interpersonal interactions with learners. It is well known that establishing personal contact or rapport with the children, will allow for ventilation.
- d. Counsellors should organize excursion for children to visit places of interest that will develop their cognitive, social and psychological domains.
- e. Counsellors should organize debates drama, play, art and music competitions for the young learners.

Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) Consultation with Government for Early Childhood Education.

Counseling Association of Nigeria should take special interest in the improvement of learning of the young children and also interface with government on the need to depolitize the process of recruitment of teachers. Only the most qualified and competent teachers should be recruited to teach young children. Subsequently, government should endeavour to also take interest in the training and retraining of teachers.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the field of guidance and counselling, is a facilitator of successful education of children. Counsellor's interventions in preschools is a major ingredients for boosting young learners' academic performance and hence, the actualization of the objectives of the National policy on Education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the foregoing pages of this paper, some modest attempts have been made to demonstrate that professional school counsellors have great role to play in promoting effective learning in early childhood education. It is concluded that professional school counsellors have unique opportunities to assist in the promotion of effective learning of the young children, through increased collaboration, consultation and interventions with those significant people in the lives of children such as the proprietors/ proprietress, teachers parents and people in the community. This paper, therefore, recommends that all stakeholders and the school counsellor in particular should fulfill their mandate as put forward in this paper so as to promote effective learning of young learners.

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