

CURRICULUM DELIVERY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED PUBLIC KINDERGARTENS IN ASHANTI REGION, GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *The research sought to review the curriculum of Early Childhood Education in Ghana: a case in public schools in Ashanti region. The purpose of the study was to improve Kindergarten education in Ghana in terms of curriculum, methodology and supervision. This study therefore adopted descriptive research methods with interview and questionnaire administration to investigate the curriculum delivery in early childhood education in Ghana. Respondents for the study were 30 kindergarten (KG) teachers from 15 selected public KG schools, 12 teacher-trainees, eight teacher educators from a College of Education and five KG coordinators. The study revealed that teachers were not doing curriculum-based teaching. The integrative approach methodology was not being followed due to formal examinations conducted by officers from the Ghana Education Service. This suggests that integrative approach to teaching which is intended to fill a gap in promoting quality teaching and learning in early schooling has not been addressed. It was also established that monitoring and supervision has not been the best since implementation of the Early Childhood Education curriculum. Equity in the provision of logistics for special needs children mentioned in the curriculum has not been implemented. Though mentioned in the curriculum, there was no delivery guide for the KG teacher.*

KEYWORDS: *Pre-School, Kindergarten, Early Childhood Development, Early Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres have been in the education system in Ghana since 1843 when the Basel Mission attached Kindergartens (KGs) to some of their primary schools in the then Gold Coast, now Ghana. This idea caught on with other missions and a few individuals by 1920. The Education Act of 1961 placed all private schools including Early Childhood Development Schools (ECDS), which had then increased, under the Ministry of Education. Owing to financial constraints, government could not include ECD education in the free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) system although it acknowledged its importance. In 2007, the government of Ghana implemented KG education into the mainstream public education. Early childhood education has the potency of affecting the future of any nation by serving as a foundation upon which all other educational levels rest thereby nurturing children with skills, attitudes and competences necessary for individual and national development. Early childhood care and education in recent times have been formalized by most countries thereby allowing private and public investment in helping children to optimize their potentials to

augment care from family with systematic social, physical, cognitive, and emotional child development (Bar-On, 2004).

In order to train children with equal or similar Early Childhood education to meet the Millennium Development Goal two (MDG2) and for holistic national development, it is imperative that public and private pre-schools provide the same or similar experiences and opportunities for all children to fully explore their potentials. Accordingly, children everywhere in Ghana will be resourced with equal or similar experiences irrespective of their social, economic, ethnic or political backgrounds. Although interventions are made to mitigate differentials due to economic and social statuses, concerns are greatly centered on curriculum and pedagogical assumptions and how they reflect are developmentally appropriate economic theories of human capital and political theories of social justice (Woodhead, 2007). The study examined curriculum delivery practices in Early Childhood Education. The rationale of the study therefore is geared towards improving KG education.

Differences in children's early childhood experiences play a formative role in shaping school readiness and largely explain the skill gaps at school entry (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2004 as cited in York, 2012). Governments all over the world acknowledge the significant benefits of early child education and care and have adopted this service as an intervention towards mitigating social and economic disparities between the rich and poor (Magnuson et al., 2004 as cited in York, 2012). The USA is on record for initiating the Head Start programme in 1965 for children from low income households and children with developmental delays or disabilities. Curricula exist to provide a structure and educational direction to teachers in their work of supporting the development of capacities and skills, while respecting the child's natural interests and choices (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999).

The Montessori approach is designed to support the natural development of children in a well-prepared environment. Dr. Maria Montessori's basic principles are the foundation of the Montessori Method. Taken as a whole, it constitutes a powerful model for helping children learn to their fullest. These principles are respect for the child, absorbent mind, sensitive periods, prepared environment, and auto education (Morrison, 2007). Understanding that one's own knowledge is built from one's own cognitive activity promotes intellectual autonomy. It is important to respect children's ideas in order to both understand their reasoning processes and to support their development of intellectual autonomy and self-regulated learning (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2010; as cited in Soo-Young, Torquati, and Molfese, 2013).

Knowledge is not to be found in the child or in the world (including adults) but in the relationship between them (Marton & Booth, 1997). For this reason, according to the Swedish curriculum, the child's search for knowledge should be developed through "play, social interaction, exploration and creativity, as well as through observation, discussion and reflection" (Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, 1998a).

Curriculum means a written plan that includes: goals for children's development and learning; experiences through which they will achieve these goals; what staff and parents do to help children achieve these goals; and, the materials needed to support the implementation of the

curriculum. (Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, & Shulman NCREL, Oak Brook, 1992). According to the Ministry of Education's curriculum for kindergarten, children enter school at age four with tremendous informal experiences which calls on the teacher to create favourable conditions to consolidate and expand these experiences for the good of the child (Curriculum Research and Development Division, 2006 as cited in York, 2012).

Australian preschool education has a history of being fragmented with consistency of provision across the different states (Brennan, 1998; Elliott, 2004; Horsley & Bauer, 2010; Press & Hayes, 2000; as cited in Kilderry, 2012). The preschool Curriculum guidelines provided a framework to assist preschool teachers to develop, implement and evaluate curriculum while aiming to maintain a developmental, social and culturally appropriate learning environment (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1998; as cited in Kilderry, 2012). Gardner's theory of numerous intelligences accentuates that there are various types of intelligences utilized by the human mind. Gardner trusts knowledge is the aftereffect of complex connections between children's heredity and encounters. This theory concentrates on how societies shape human potential. Gardner claims that children learn and convey what needs to be in a wide range of ways. The numerous knowledge theory permits instructors to see the positive characteristics of all children. Educators likewise view Gardner's hypothesis as a significant aide for settling on educational program choices. It allows them to evaluate children's learning qualities. These are Bodily-kinesthetic, Musical-cadenced, Logical-numerical, Verbal-semantic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Visual-spatial and Naturalistic insight (Fierros, 2004).

A child learns by exploring, interacting, observing, imitating and listening: the child's thoughts are structured on the basis of what the child sees, hears, touches or feels and on the basis of the relationships that the child has with the adults and children around him or her.

Meeting Early Childhood Needs: Québec's Educational Program for Childcare Services (2007)

The ecological and dynamic model of school transition is based on the ecological view with concentric micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Following ecological terminology, the actual entrance to formal schooling, as well as the concrete activities aimed to smoothen it, take place at micro and meso levels: transition is directly experienced by the child (microsystem), and transition practices are interrelations among settings in which the child actively participates, that is, the preschool and elementary school professionals and the family (mesosystem).

METHOD

The study adopted descriptive research approach of qualitative inquiry. Descriptive research involves either identifying the characteristics of an observed event or exploring possible correlations among two or more phenomena. Leedy & Ormrod further stated that, descriptive research examines the situation as it is and does not involve changing or modifying the situation under investigation nor its intended cause and effect relationship. Descriptive studies seek to 'draw a picture' of a situation, person or event or show how things are related to each other (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). As per Hedrick (1993 as cited in Gray, 2004), the purpose of a

descriptive study is to provide a picture of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs. The researcher however used the descriptive approach to discuss and explain the key findings from the field. Numerical variables were discussed quantitatively by the use of SPSS. Instruments used for data collection were interview and questionnaire administration.

The School environment settings, such as location in metropolitan or nonmetropolitan area, or location in high or low poverty area, as well as the school size, have been found to determine the implementation of transition practices (Pianta et al., 1999; Rous et al., 2010; as cited in Ahtola, Poikonen, Kontoniemi, Niemi, & Nurmi, 2011). In view of this, three Schools were selected from each of the areas studied, that is, three Municipalities, one Metropolis and one District to have a fair view of the early childhood settings.

The purposive sampling selected 15 public KG schools from the Ashanti region. Besides these 12 teacher-trainees and eight Teacher educators from a College of Education, 30 KG Teachers, and five coordinators were the respondents. All the respondents answered a 20-item self-administered questionnaire that had a return rate of 49 (98%) out of 50. Data source focused on curriculum used in the early childhood education, equity provision for special needs children, teaching method, mode of assessment and supervision. Informal interviews and direct observation of classroom settings and activities conducted over 12 weeks provided additional data for filtering data obtained from questionnaire responses. A total of 30 visits of 20 to 45 minutes observation per visit in each school was adopted to obtain a holistic view of teaching and learning processes across the study area (a Metropolis, three Municipalities and a District). Combining different methods to gather data from different sources (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) enabled a comprehensive description of the factors that affect curriculum delivery in early childhood settings.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 were responses gathered from teacher trainees and Teacher educators of the selected College of Education (Early Childhood Department). As critical stakeholders, the respondents ought to be abreast with the curriculum which is the rudimental document for the KG education. The tables indicate how they interpreted their understanding of the curriculum that is being used for the implementation. The feedback from the Early Childhood Department has been tabulated.

The responses from table 1 indicate that the teacher trainees do not have idea about the name of the curriculum the KG schools are using though they have them in their possession. Out of the 12 teacher-trainees who answered the questionnaire, only one was able to identify the curriculum by name that is, Kindergarten Curriculum while the rest of the teacher-trainees got the name wrong. Eleven (91.7%) of the teacher-trainees could not indicate name of the curriculum they were studying for KG education. This indicates that there is something wrong with their training since the very material which is their main tool for their work could not be identified. If teacher-trainees could not differentiate between methodology, supplementary material and curriculum then the curriculum implementation was not apt. This is so because some of them were referring

to the curriculum as integrated approach to teaching (Methodology) and NALAP which is a supplementary material for literacy.

Table 1: Name of Curriculum used in the Implementation: Teacher Trainees

Name of Curriculum	Frequency	Percent
Informal Curriculum	1	8.3
No idea	3	25.0
National Literacy Accelerated Programme (NALAP)	5	41.7
The Kindergarten Curriculum	1	8.3
Integrated approach to teaching	1	8.3
No Response	1	8.3
Total	12	100.0

The response in table 2 shows that 6 (75%) of the teacher educators could not identify the name of the curriculum as KG curriculum. This indicates that thorough work is not being done in curriculum training at the College. On the other hand, some of the tutors might not have had adequate training that would have required them to train others.

Table 2: Name of Curriculum used in the Implementation: Teacher Educators

Name of Curriculum	Frequency	Percent
No idea	1	12.5
Not yet implemented	1	12.5
KG curriculum	2	25.0
Activity-oriented type	1	12.5
Mathematics activities (Numeracy)	1	12.5
A written document (Curriculum)	2	25.0
Total	8	100.0

Ten (83.3%) of the teacher-trainees indicated that there are no equal opportunities for special needs children in the curriculum (Table 3). They stated that it might be in the curriculum but delivery direction was not given. This means that pedagogical training of teacher-trainees on special needs children is compromised. It will therefore affect their delivery in the classroom. This will also affect the inclusive education in the early learning stage of the child where the assimilation of special needs is not properly rooted.

Table 3: Provision of equal opportunities for the children with special needs: Teacher Trainees

Provision of Equal Opportunities	Frequency	Percent
This type of curriculum deals with lessons on values, ethics or morals, molded experiences based on family's preferences	2	16.7
Not at all	10	83.3
Total	12	100.0

Four (50%) of the tutors were able to indicate that there is no provision of equal opportunities for special needs children (Table 4). Interviews conducted during an interaction in the Early Childhood Department of the selected College of Education confirmed that equity was not catered for in the curriculum in terms of mode of instructions. They further said that, this has a negative effect on the implementation of the KG education. It means that affected children were not catered for in terms of instructional delivery in the KG education. Also, teacher-trainees did not have adequate training in special needs children since the curriculum is silent about the mode of teaching the children in question.

Table 4: Provision of equal opportunities for the children with special needs: Teacher Educators

Provision of Equal Opportunities	Frequency	Percent
No idea	1	12.5
Yes	3	37.3
No	4	50
Total	8	100.0

In table 5, all the teachers interviewed indicated that equity is not provided at the KG settings as stated in the syllabus. They further said, they have not gone through any special training that can help them handle special needs children.

Table 5: Provision of equal opportunities for the children with special needs (KG Teachers)

Provision of Equal Opportunities	Frequency	Percent
Indicated in the syllabus but no direction	9	30
Not in practice	3	10
Not yet implemented	6	20
Not at all	3	10
No special needs skills training	8	26.7
No idea	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0

The Curriculum used at the KG schools was found to be the same as the one sanctioned by the Ghana Education Service. The lessons taught in the schools were structured by a time table within which the curriculum was delivered. Lessons taught were mostly not integrated but were treated as subjects in isolation. Lessons were sometimes extended when children were involved in the activity of writing to enable them complete the exercise. The teachers gained the attention of the children during lessons through the use of “Hello”, “Hi”, and activities such as singing songs or reciting rhymes to bring back the interest of the children to the lesson. Among the fifteen schools visited only a Pilot KG school in the Kumasi Metropolis made use of television as teaching and learning facility to watch visuals. Besides, a Model KG in Asokore Mampong Municipality previously made use of video as an instructional medium, but due to the risk involved in carrying the TV set from one class to the other, the practice was stopped.

Teaching Method

According to the KG curriculum, teaching should be done in an integrated approach. Psycho-social skills have been integrated in all the domains. It should therefore not be taught as a subject (Ministry of Education, Curriculum for Kindergarten, 2006). However, it was realized that in practice subject teaching was applied during interactions (facilitation). During the interview sessions, it was inquired whether the teachers have any supplementary materials other than the curriculum and the following were the responses from some of the teachers:

“...we cannot go by the integrated method of teaching because our children are examined formally. Therefore, if we do not do subject teaching they cannot pass the examination organized by the education office. I think the concept of KG education is about school readiness. I have taught in the KG throughout my teaching career for twenty-six (26) years. These children need to go through experiences that will help them get ready for formal schooling. Look at our classroom, furniture is a problem, there are no Teaching/Learning Materials (TLMs), even chalk for the children to do scribbling” (Personal Communication with Teacher ‘A’: February, 2015).

“... yes we have the curriculum but the coordinators brought another supplementary material that is National Literacy Accelerated Programme (NALAP) and said we should use that in place of literacy in the curriculum. As a matter of fact, we are confused since the same content could

be found in the curriculum except few changes. Now, some of us are using the curriculum while others are using the NALAP. We have a problem but they do not know how to address it. They should organize workshops to address some of these issues that come up instead of dumping materials on us at will” (Personal Communication with Teacher ‘B’: November 2015).

Almost all the teachers interviewed asserted to the views expressed in the above quotes by some of the teachers in the KG settings. The teachers were not enthused about the classroom environment, instructional resources, funding and teacher professional development.

Mode of Assessment

As prescribed by the Ghana Education Service curriculum for KG, the children are not to be formally assessed. At this stage, assessment must be as informal as possible. Teachers must avoid the temptation of subjecting children’s work to formal assessment. There should rather be informal techniques such as observation, conversation and gallery work where children go round to appreciate each other’s work (Ministry of Education, Curriculum for Kindergarten, 2006). A greater number of teachers interviewed alluded to the fact that they were not in support of formal assessment of the children as it is being encouraged by the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Education offices. The regional coordinator shared her frustration in the conduct of examinations; she indicated that, she would see to it that all the Districts and Municipalities would stop this formal mode of assessment. She went further to say that holistic assessment which takes care of the child’s total participation at school would be encouraged for the needed information.

A teacher stated with reference to the GES curriculum in the following words:

“...at this stage, assessment must be as informal as possible. Teachers should avoid the temptation of subjecting children’s work to formal assessment that is examination. At the end of the year, every teacher should be able to assess the children and promote them to the next class. This mode of the assessment is referred to as Assessment tool that is, assessment is done from day one throughout the period the child remains in the KG. What is happening at the school settings is that, we are made to conduct examination printed by the Education Offices. Now the initial assessment plan is defeated since the office is interested in documentary records instead of practical development the Curriculum seeks to achieve at the end of their school readiness training” (Personal Communication with Teacher ‘C’, July, 2015).

Polite (1998) opines that, early training projects backing are alluded to as “psycho-social improvement” that as a rule incorporates social, enthusiastic, mental, and motor or physical domains. These experiences are fast changing in kids aged four and five, and are interrelated. Hence, formal stringent assessments are not KG curriculum friendly. Given a curriculum model that sees learning as the development of more complex and useful understanding, knowledge and skill attached to cultural and purposeful contexts, rather than a staircase of individually acquired skills, the assessment and evaluation of children and programmes becomes a complex matter (Carr & May in Penn, 2000).

Supervision

The Regional, Metropolitan, Municipal and District coordinators are responsible for overseeing the implementation and monitoring of the KG education. These coordinators are supposed to have better understanding of the KG pedagogy. It was realized from the coordinators that monitoring role was not performed exclusively by the KG coordinators but also circuit supervisors in the various circuits supervise alongside with the coordinators. These circuit supervisors either ignore the pedagogical skills of the KG education or they lack them. According to the interview and observation conducted, it was established that the circuit supervisors are more interested in records keeping than the pedagogy. A respondent indicated as follows:

“... the interest of the circuit supervisors lies in these records: lesson notes, class exercises, continuous assessment, examinations conducted by the Education Office hence the pedagogy is not being attended to. We are indeed under pressure to do more exercises since we do not know the questions that would appear on the examination papers”, (Personal communication with Teacher ‘D’; January 2015,).

The above assertions were supported by all the teachers interviewed. They were of the view that pedagogical skills that should be emphasized during their visits were down played in the name of record keeping. The teachers also maintained that there should be regular refresher courses to update their skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The KG curriculum has a lot of activities that will help build the child’s capacity regarding school readiness. In spite of this, equity is not provided for the special needs children. This is so because the curriculum does not indicate how these children should be treated in the KG settings. The parents have no role to play in the child’s developmental growth so far as school readiness is concern. According to the World Bank (2001), early child development includes services designed for the physical and intellectual growth of children in their early years (ages 0-6).

It was noted that supervision and monitoring were not done only by the early childhood coordinators who have the skill to monitor the activities in the KG classroom. Kindergarten education is very important in the child’s development. Therefore, much attention is required of the teachers.

It is worth mentioning that a greater number of the teachers appreciate the teaching method stipulated in the curriculum that is integrated in approach. However, teachers are not using the integrated method of teaching but have resorted to subject teaching because the mode of assessment which is assessment tool is not used by the examination system currently. On the other hand, assessment tool that caters for continuous assessment of pupils to know their strength is stopped. This will go a long way to affect the child’s school attendance.

It was generally recognized that the successful delivery of any curriculum depends on certain structural features such as funding, regulations, accountability and adequate training. For instance, without properly trained staff, a curriculum will not be delivered properly. According to

the study, funding, regulatory and accountability measures are weak in the early childhood sector in Ghana, which prevents adequate training in the KG settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Workshops and seminars on pedagogical skills should be organized periodically for teachers to keep them abreast with trends in teaching methodology (integrated approach), assessment (assessment tool) and class management. Subject teaching should be discouraged forthwith. Equity provision of special needs children should be seriously addressed in the curriculum since there is a shortfall in how delivery should be done. An elaborate Special Education course should be designed for the early childhood teacher-trainees to equip them for the classroom. Inclusive education must have its root in the KG education since that is the foundation of children's School life. The Kindergarten classroom should be provided with well-resourced interactive learning materials to achieve their set goals. These resources should help develop their formative years and also their psychosocial domain. The Inspectorate Division of Ghana Education Service should be empowered to do effective monitoring and supervision. There should be enough pedagogical skills training for the personnel to equip them for their role as supervisors in the KG settings.

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