

Levels of Child-Friendliness of Nursery Schools in Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study compared the level of child-friendliness of nursery schools in Osun State, Nigeria, on the basis of ownership; and determined the relationship between the level of child-friendliness of nursery schools and the academic performance of their children. The study adopted the survey design. The study employed the stratified sampling technique to select 435 pupils and 435 parents of nursery school children from seven Local Government Areas in Osun State, Nigeria. A "Nursery School Child-friendliness Questionnaire (NSCfQ), which measured the responses of parents in respect of the parameters of child-friendliness of nursery schools, and "Nursery Children Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning Test (NCVQRT)" which measured the academic performance of nursery schools children, were used to collect data. Data collected were analysed with frequency counts and percentages, Kruskal Wallis (H) Test and Pearson Product Moment correlation statistics. Results showed that nursery schools in Osun State met the criteria of child-friendliness such as proactive inclusiveness (76.5%), academic effectiveness and relevance (81.38%), health, safety and protectiveness (80.73%) and participatory enablement (82.78%). The results also showed that there was no significant difference ($H=0.33$; $p>.05$) in the child-friendliness of schools owned by private, individuals, religious organisations, higher institutions of learning, and corporate group. The results further showed that there was no significant relationship between child-friendliness of nursery schools and the academic performance of their children ($r=0.98$, $p>.05$). The study concluded that nursery school owners in Osun State were conscious of the essential requirements for a successful nursery education and had put child-friendly facilities in place.

Keywords: *child-friendliness; nursery schools; Osun State; Nigeria*

1. Introduction

Education is seen all over the world as a major contributor to the development of the human personality, peace and human rights. This may explain why its foundation is not left to chances. The need to create a sense for positive human development, enjoyment of peace and fundamental human rights might perhaps have lead to the introduction of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Early childhood education in a broad sense refers to the programmes and settings that serve young children from birth through eight years (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2002). The Children's Health Encyclopaedia (2008) defines early childhood education programme as that which consists of activities and/ or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children prior to their entry into elementary school. Areas of early childhood education includes, day nurseries, child care, crèche (birth-3years), nursery school/pre-school (3-4years), kindergarten education (5-6years), primary education care (6-8years) and education for children with disabilities.

The demand for this level of education is propelled by the need for working mothers to have a safe place to keep their children while at work and the growing awareness of the value of pre-primary education, to prepare the child for school. There are now many day-care centres for children aged 0-3 years and pre-primary or nursery schools for children aged 3-5 years. But their quality varies. Therefore, attendance of any depends largely on the socio-economic status of the parents. Historically, as far back as 1996, over 12,000 pre-primary institutions had been registered by the Government [FGN/UNICEF/UNESCO, 2000], while many more are operating without being registered or inspected.

Given the importance of ECE as a foundation of formal education, it is very pertinent that an ECE centre should be very friendly in outlook and be an embodiment of all other factors that could not ordinarily motivate children to learn and play, but could also enhance their readiness for school and in turn assure their academic performances. However, it may be difficult to label a school as unfriendly (or friendly) to children without considering some fundamental indices.

Chowdhury and Choudhury (2002) explained that a child-friendly school is a school that is acceptable to the learners and possesses all the necessities that could assist learners to adjust into the school setting. According to Chowdhury and colleague, a school that has an environment that makes teaching and learning pleasant and appealing to the child and reduces tension and anxiety is a child-friendly school. This may then suggest (in author's opinion) that a school that is carefully planned in terms of physical set up, site and surroundings and that which has a well-planned curriculum and caring personnel may be regarded as a child-friendly school.

By and large, the concept of child-friendliness is amorphous and it calls for a review. It may denote the acceptability and adjustment of children into school setting, and that which not only provides children with quality education, but also with an environment that is fun, healthy and engaging – a place where they can play, be protected from harm, express their views and actively participate in the learning process (Tovika, Kabekabe & Buia, 2004). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2006: 1) explained that a school that is child-friendly provides children with opportunities to enjoy their fundamental rights. According to UNICEF, a "Child-friendly School (CFS)" provides a means of transporting the concepts of Child Right into classroom practice and school management and its framework is made up of proactive inclusiveness; academic effectiveness and relevance; health, safety and protectiveness; gender responsiveness; active engagement; and participatory enablingness, which are necessary and mutually reinforcing the conditions of success of a child-friendly school. An organisation called Whole Building Design Guide (WBDG, 2010), opined that an Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) that provides a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment is essential for the healthy development of the children is a child-friendly school. WBDG accepts the majority view that all child development centres should stress quality care, child growth and development; and attributes the following standards in early childhood centres: a child-friendly classrooms; good facilities "designed for children"; "child-sized furniture"; and "excellent indoor and outdoor spaces for physical activities".

Lower and Cassidy (2007) also regard factors of child-friendliness as indicators of global quality. The factors itemised by the duo are materials, activities, health and safety and teacher-child interactions. In their justification for a favourable organisational climate of an Early Childhood Education Centre, Lower and Cassidy remarked that attitudes and team work affect teachers' interactions with children and that teachers will be flexible to the needs of the children if their environment (that is the ECEC) is future focused. In essence, it is an environment that prepares children for the future. This thus suggests that effective teacher-pupil interaction may be a good index of child-friendliness; and physical infrastructures are primary motivators of teacher-pupil interactions. These opinions agree with those indices of CFS itemised by UNICEF (as listed above). The nursery school is also considered important because it enhances children's development, intellectual (reading and writing), improves independence, concentration and sociability and provides for equity as children from disadvantaged communities can benefit from good quality preschool experiences; and behavioural and moral development of children (Educational Institute of Scotland, 2008).

The physical environment is also always considered to have to effects on the behaviour and moral development of people, children and adults who function within it. This may be because a school environment encompasses psycho-social and physical dimensions which exercise reciprocal effects on each other. In fact, research evidence provided by Boekaerts (1993) indicates that a supportive academic setting is considered by children as an extension of their personal resources and that which serves to reduce anxiety and negative effects that can arise.

However, education which is no doubt the best legacy for a progressive nation is fast becoming a money-making venture in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the standard appears to be compromised (Adio, 2010); and this may be because many people including those without background in early childhood education and those who knew nothing about education appear to be finding their ways into the system - a development that suggests an adverse effect on the sector. There has also been an emerging era of proliferation of substandard schools across the country. Today, one finds many schools in 'room and parlour' apartments; and one may begin to wonder whether or not government is aware of the existence of these schools in the first place and the fear that education sector has become a free for all enterprise. Without much gainsaying, this may have its adverse consequences on the quality of children that are produced from such schools.

This fear of quality makes one to ask whether the establishment of a private school should be by every Tom, Dick and Harry - as it is noteworthy that private individuals, higher educational institutions, religious organisations and corporate groups are now proprietors of schools. This is even when majority of them may not be ready to spend on personnel and infrastructure to ensure quality education, against which their schools may be evaluated in terms of quality of child-friendliness. By and large, it is doubtful that whoever wants to come into the education business just to make money can deliver the desired quality education service to the nation (Aiyegbosi, 2010). This may also be the reason why Aiyegbosi decried the rotting state of private schools in the Nigeria. According to him "What makes a good school is a composition of trained teachers, functional instructional materials, good learning environment, cooperating parents and

responsive pupils or students. Therefore, any school without these basic teaching facilities may be said to be a substandard school and must be closed down".

A closer opinion to the above is that of Adio (2010). According to Adio, private schools in Nigeria need special attention for its growth, development and sustenance, as part of government's efforts to reform education. Adio explains that the phenomenon of substandard schools outnumbering the preferably better ones in Nigeria may be seen as an ugly situation; and requires that the government is expected to take urgent steps to checkmate their proliferation if it expects good standard and excellent output (quality) from private schools which specifically are the early childhood education centres in the country.

However, it may be difficult for the Federal Government of Nigeria to take appropriate steps in addressing the problem of substandard schools (schools that are unfriendly towards the children), and the apparent contravention of the international standard of an ideal early child care centre as itemised by UNICEF: except they have adequate data on the status of nursery schools especially on its level of child-friendliness and the quality of the output (children's academic performances). These may as well not be at the disposal of the government. In addition, the federal government is not responsible for the approval of nursery schools and child-care centres. It is the responsibility of each State's Ministry of Education (SME). It is thus assumed that all the SMEs in Nigeria would not only had taken all necessary steps to ensure that all prospective schools proprietors meet the necessary requirements that comply with the parameters of child-friendliness as itemised by the UNICEF, but are also supervising them regularly to ensure that the standards are not compromised. It is believed that if the SMEs are 'upright' in this regard, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), through the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) could have sufficient information that would inform whatever decision to take in addressing achieving high level of child-friendliness of the nursery schools and early child-care centres in the country. A way of making the FME to have adequate information about the child-friendly status of the schools is to embark on their assessment at the state levels.

This study is therefore designed to investigate the situation of nursery schools in Osun State, a state in South-Western Nigeria vis-à-vis their level of child-friendliness and its impact on children quality of performance. The study bears in mind the fact that the Nigerian National Policy on Education stipulates that corporate organisations and private individuals could establish nursery schools (FRN, 2004); and the schools established by them are expected to meet the UNICEF's parameters of child-friendliness such as "academic effectiveness and relevance", "health, safety and protectiveness" and "participatory enablement". Therefore, given the freedom that private individual, religious organisations, higher institutions of learning, and corporate groups have to establish and manage nursery schools, it is thus necessary to find out the extent to which such nursery schools in Osun State, Nigeria, meet these standards.

Specifically, this paper seeks to achieve the following objectives

- a. determine the extent to which nursery schools in Osun State meet the parameters of child-friendliness such as "proactive inclusiveness", "academic effectiveness and relevance", health, safety and protectiveness", and "participatory enablement";
- b. compare the child-friendliness of nursery schools on the basis of ownership (private, individuals, religious organisations, higher institutions of learning, and corporate group); and
- c. determine the relationship between the levels of child-friendliness of nursery schools in Osun State and the academic performance of their children.

2. Method

The study adopted the survey design. The independent variables were the parameters of child-friendliness, namely, proactive inclusiveness; academic effectiveness and relevance; health, safety and protectiveness and participatory enablement of the selected schools. The academic performance of the learners served as the dependent variable (to child-friendliness of the schools). The population for the study consisted of all children of nursery schools in Osun State and their parents. A total number of 435 pupils and their parents (435) were involved in the study from 7 Local Government areas in Osun State, using stratified random sampling technique. Specifically, 15 pupils were purposively selected from 29 schools visited-making a total of 435. The pupils that participated in the study were selected with the assistance of their class teachers. 15 parents were also selected from each of the 29 schools making a total of 435. A parents of each pupil used for the study was selected for ease of administration of the questionnaire measuring the level of child-friendliness of the children's school.

The two research instruments used for the study were designed by the researchers. These were the "Nursery School Child-friendliness Questionnaire (NSCFQ)" and "Nursery Children Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning Test

(NCVQRT)". The NSCfQ was a 4-sectioned and 4-point scale (Very True-4, True-3, Somehow True-2, and Not True-1) measuring the responses of parents in respect of the parameters of child-friendliness of nursery schools. The criteria against which their responses were sought are: proactive inclusiveness (items 1-6); academic effectiveness and relevance (items 7-13); health, safety and protectiveness (items 14-21) and participatory enablement (items 22-30). These criteria were identified with a view to examining the extent to which the schools owned by different proprietors meet the parameters of child-friendliness of nursery education. The instrument was sent to the parents with the assistance of children handlers who gave the scale to the children as homework that must be completed by their parents.

The "Nursery Children Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning Test (NCVQRT) was a 23 item achievement test measuring Verbal and Quantitative reasoning of nursery school pupils. The instrument was designed by the researchers with a view to determining the levels of academic performance of nursery school children and to find out the relationship between the child-friendliness of the schools and the academic performance of their pupils. The NCVQRT was administered on the children with the assistance of the children handlers in the classrooms. All questions carried equal mark of 1 each.

The instruments thus yielded high reliability coefficient of internal consistency (NSCfQ($r=0.76$) and NCVQRT ($r=0.71$) respectively. The completed instruments were scored, coded and subjected to descriptive frequency counts and percentages, to determine the level of child-friendliness of the selected schools. The keys to the ratings were 70% and above, 'Very High', 60% - 69% (High), 50%-59% (Average), 40%-49% (Low), and less than 40% (Very Low). The relationship in the level of child-friendliness of the various categories of schools (that is private individuals, religious organisations, higher institutions of learning, and corporate groups) and that between child-friendliness and academic performance of the children were placed on a probability of 5% ($P<.05$), using the Kruskal Wallis H-test and Pearson Product Moment correlation statistics.

3. Results

3.1 Research question 1

To what extent do Nursery Schools in Osun State meet the parameter of child-friendliness?

Results obtained in respect of research question 1, suggested that all categories of schools in Osun State, Nigeria, met the parameters of child-friendliness of proactive inclusiveness at a very high level i.e. private individuals (77.2%); higher institutions of learning (76%); religious denomination (77%) and corporate group (75.8%). In terms of academic effectiveness and relevance, all school types were at high level i.e. private individuals (80%), higher institutions of learning, (82%), religious denomination (80.5%) and corporate group (83%). Moreover, all the school types were rated very high in terms of health, safety and protectiveness i.e. private individuals (80%), higher institutions of learning (83%), religious denomination (80.9%) and corporate group (79%). So also did all categories of schools meet the parameters of participatory enablement at very high level - private individuals (92%), higher institutions of learning (82.5%), religious denomination (79.6%) and corporate group (77%). On the average, all the categories of schools met all the parameters of child-friendliness at very high levels, that is, proactive inclusiveness (76.5%), academic effectiveness and relevance (81.38%), health, safety and protectiveness (80.73%) and participatory enablingness (82.78%).

3.2 Research Question 2

Is there any significant difference in the level of child-friendliness of nursery schools owned by different proprietors in Osun State?

Results obtained on this questions indicates that there was no significant relationship ($H=0.33$; $P>.05$) in the child-friendliness of nursery schools owned by different proprietors. Hence the null hypothesis was accepted.

3.3 Research Question 3

Is there any significant relationship between child-friendliness and academic performance of Nursery schools children in Osun State?

Results obtained on this question indicated that there was no significant relationship ($r=0.98$, $p>.05$) between nursery school's child-friendliness and the academic performance of nursery school children in Osun State, hence the null hypothesis accepted.

4. Discussion of Findings

Results obtained in this study showed that all nursery schools with different categories of ownerships -- private individuals, higher institutions of learning, religious denomination and corporate groups met all the parameters of child-friendliness at a very high level. This thus suggests that they are very child-friendly. By implication, they might have conformed to the UNICEF (2007) parameters of child-friendliness, namely proactive inclusiveness; academic effectiveness and relevance; health, safety and protectiveness and participatory enablement. Meeting these parameters also agrees with the opinion of Okebukola (2000) that a friendly school is a school with the child and the environment in mind and with adequate human and material resources to enhance meaningful learning. The finding of this study buttresses a fact on the educational debut of Osun State in 2006, which stated that the state belongs to one of the categories of states perceived as educationally advantaged, with school proprietors who understand Montessori theory and are well learned people. They are also reported to value qualitative education. The school may also be seen to have conformed to the Montessori and Froebel standards, that a nursery school must allow children to learn best in an environment that is safe, friendly and void of any form of harassment.

All the above also agree with the opinion of an educational planner, Ejeh (2006), who opined that more effective control should be exercised over the establishment of nursery schools and that before the construction of any nursery schools facility, approval should be given to building plans (and other facilities) so that they will be able to meet the minimum standard. According to Ejeh, the facilities should further be inspected and declared adequate before the admission of the first batch of children. The finding of this study therefore suggests that relevant authorities might have done their required duties before schools that were visited for this study were approved to take off. Indeed they could be considered to have exhibited some degrees of 'uprightness' (followed the rules) in the process of approving the schools. This might then justify the high level of child-friendliness of the schools used for the study.

Similarly, the result showed that there was no significant relationship in the quality of child-friendliness of schools owned by different proprietors. Put in another form, there was a significant difference in their qualities: not minding whether they all met the parameters of child-friendliness at very high levels. What is responsible for this may not be easily determined. However one can speculate that the exposure of the founders (in terms of academic background), the school philosophy, and the financial strength of the school (which could determine the amount paid to teachers as salary and the extent to which it retains teachers) might have been. This result justified that of the Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development (1994) that better remuneration of some private nursery school teachers can enhance the teaching process and as a result can help in increasing the performance of learners.

Lastly, the result showed that there was no significant relationship between nursery schools' child-friendliness and academic performance of nursery school children in the state. This agrees with the idea of UNICEF (2007) which says that the vision of a child-friendly school for educating children goes beyond who gets the best score on the final examination. Hence, this study contradicted the general notion or perspective guided by the Montessori and Froebel ideas which say that when a school is child-friendly, the academic performance of the pupils may be enhanced. But in this context, the reserve is the case. By implication other proximal factors could have been responsible for this, which include: teacher availability and qualification, teachers' capabilities and methodology, effective management practices of head teachers in form of quality control, organisation on the part of the owner, financial management and school philosophy, and family/parental involvement. This agrees with Asagwara (1997), UNICEF (2001), and Nye, Konstantopoulos and Hedges (2004) that learning achievement is based on teacher availability, qualification and the quality of teaching experience in the classroom. Eggen and Kauchak (1994), and Everton (1987) also have a common opinion which indicated that classroom supervision and management, specifically as it relates to children behaviour, class rules and procedures, and the physical environment on learning found a strong positive correlation between teachers' managerial abilities and children achievement. Thus, this discussion can be concluded that if children's learning is to be enhanced and to achieve great success, particularly in the area of learning outcome, there is the need to create child-friendly physical and psycho-social environments to make the schools conducive for learning.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of this study, early childhood education is observed to be capable of having a positive influence on educational development of children at childhood and in later life. The nursery schools owners in Osun state appeared to be conscious of this, as they seemed to have recognised the importance of meeting the essential requirements for

successful nursery education and had put child-friendly facilities in place in the schools that varying proprietors have established.

Premised on the findings of this study, it is recommended that nursery school owners in Nigeria should make their schools very child friendly as this may hopefully impact positively on the academic performance of their children and make the children have an overall success derivable from nursery education.

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