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MEASURING TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING CENTRES IN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS IN ILORIN SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT, KWARA STATE**Olabisi Adedigba, Ph.D****Abstract**

Creating an environment for children's learning with a variety of learning centres is an important aspect of organizing a high quality learning environment which can actually make teaching and learning more efficient for children. Previous research highlighted the importance of learning centres in children's learning and development but little was said about the teachers' awareness and knowledge of the importance of learning centres in preschool classrooms. Hence, this study investigated teachers' awareness and knowledge of importance of learning centres in Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State. The research design for this study was descriptive survey. Population comprised all the pre-primary and primary school teachers in Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State. Simple random sampling technique was adopted to select 20 schools and a total of 200 respondents. Two instruments tagged Teachers' Awareness of Learning Centre ($r=0.83$) and Teachers' Knowledge of importance of Learning Centres ($r=0.87$) were used to collect the data needed for the study. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of percentages, frequency counts, mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics of t-test. The result revealed that teachers' awareness of learning centres is low and they did not have knowledge of importance of learning centres. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made that courses on learning centres should be included in the curriculum for the training of early childhood and primary school teachers. Also, that workshop, training and re-training should be organized for teachers in the field to educate them about learning centres and their importance.

Keywords: Learning centres, Teachers' awareness, Teachers' knowledge, Importance of learning centres

Introduction

Developmentally appropriate learning environments are prepared to foster positive development of the whole child through self-directed activities and play. When the environment is prepared with varieties of developmentally appropriate materials, children are encouraged to investigate and actively engage in learning experiences as they interact with materials individually and as a group. Teachers can facilitate learning by providing organized centres that encourage independent activity. Learning

centres enable the teachers to work with individual child and group of children on specific skills while the rest of the class is actively learning (Frye & Mumpower, 2001; Firlik, 2006; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Danko-McGhee, 2009; Adedigba, 2015). Learning centres can help meet the diverse needs and skills of young children. Children learn by doing and they actively construct knowledge by interacting with the world around them (Isbell & Exelby, 2001; Lillard, 2013).

Playful learning balanced with purposeful activities encouraged more engaged learning and the more children are engaged the fewer the behaviour problems. Learning centres can provide necessary review of basic skills such as creativity, word families or practicing numeracy facts (Frost, Wortham & Riefel, 2008; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010). Learning centres help to develop essential content vocabulary in children. For example, in classrooms where content theme is integrated into dramatic play with six to eight year olds, sophisticated productions of reading, writing and oral language result. Learning centres do not need to be complex or expensive; they can be structured with a specific sequence of tasks or open-ended materials that stimulate pupils' creativity and oral vocabulary (Isbell & Exelby, 2001).

Copple & Bredekamp (2009) and Stuber (2007) describe learning centres as distinct areas in the classroom that offer various materials and opportunity for hands-on activities and learning at individually appropriate level. They provide children with opportunities to engage in hands-on learning across the curriculum. They emphasized that children need time to think and manipulate materials for deep learning to occur, play and other experiences in which children engage in active learning promote development in all domains. According to Isenberg & Jalongo (2012), learning centres are well defined, organized areas of the classroom set aside for specific learning purposes without teacher's constant presence and direction. These are areas within the classroom where pupils learn about specific subjects by playing and engaging in different activities. Each centre is carefully constructed to address specific educational goals.

Learning centres allow children to be self-disciplined by exploring in their own way and intentionally directing their own learning (Frost, Wortham & Riefel, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp (2009; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2012), In the learning centres, children are exposed to many things that allow them to be self-motivated by concentrating on things that interest them intensely either individually or cooperatively with a partner or a group. Also, learning centres can be an important part of keeping pupils interested in school, helping teachers to put the child at the centre of his/her decision making and relate to the pupils outside the world. They offer children genuine choices that are intentionally developed by a knowledgeable teacher and this promotes competence and independence as well as more academic learning in all children (Whitebook, 2003). Learning centres can be designated in many different ways and can focus on different subjects such as mathematics, science, art, language or history.

Teachers need to create an intellectually engaging responsive environment to promote each child's learning and development (National Association for Education of Young Children, 2005). Children need supportive environment that nurtures their social, emotional, physical, ethical, civic, creative and cognitive development (Strong-Wilson, 2000; Miller & Cunningham, 2003; Jalongo & Isenberg, 2012). Learning centres are used by the teacher to support the whole child so that enhanced growth, development and meaningful learning can occur. Dodge (1999) describes how primary grade teachers can make more informed decisions about the many aspects of teaching young children, including setting up a classroom environment that uses centres to encourage learning and allows teachers to access that learning.

The more stimulating the learning centres are, the more a child develops and learns. Languages and communicative skills are especially important during early years. When children spend their early years in less stimulating or less emotionally and physically supportive environment, brain development is affected and leads to cognitive, social and behavioural delays. Later in life, these children may have difficulty dealing with complex situations and environments (Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman & Wells, 2004; Reynolds 2005). Thus, teachers should have awareness of learning centres and as well be mindful of their importance in making teaching and learning go smoothly and the overall development of the child (Amopegba, 2007; Jalongo & Isenberg, 2012). In a learning environment where learning centres are adequately available, teachers seek to be partners and guides to pupils as they learn as they carefully prepare the environment to ensure that it provides strong messages about respect for the children and for their learning (Firlik, 2006; Bullard, 2010; Bredekamp, 2011).

Research has confirmed that a learning environment that is set up with the different learning centres can positively support teaching and learning (Curtis & Carter, 2005; Firlik, 2006; Dilek & Esra, 2008; Bullard, 2010; Bredekamp, 2011 and Adedigba, 2015). These studies confirmed that designated centres for learning support the whole child, enhance growth and development as meaningful learning occur in children. Learning centres cheered children to be self-disciplined by exploring in their own way and intentionally directing their own learning. Children are exposed to many things that allow them to be self-motivated as they concentrate on things that interest them intensely. A teacher experiencing difficulty with pupils' behaviour also can overcome this problem if the classroom arrangement includes materials within each learning centre (Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman & Wells, 2004).

The previous research on learning centres have only succeeded in investigating the importance of learning centres in children learning and development. The literature available does not have much about teachers' awareness and utilization of these learning centres in early childhood schools particularly in Kwara State which the present research did. As important as the learning centres in children's learning and development, most pre-schools

classroom do not have and this makes it difficult for one to conclude whether teachers have knowledge of what learning centres are or are familiar with setting up a learning environment with adequate learning areas. In order to ensure qualities in care and services provided to children at preschool ages, it becomes imperative to examine teachers' understanding of what learning or activities areas are and their importance in providing quality education for children. The study therefore investigated teachers' awareness of and their knowledge of the role of learning centres in preschool classrooms in Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State. Also, it determined the differences in teachers' knowledge of the role of learning centres in preschool classrooms based on their gender and educational qualification.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised:

1. What is the level of teachers' awareness of what learning centres are in Ilorin South Local government Area?
2. What is the level of teachers' knowledge of the importance of learning centres in preschool classrooms?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the study.

Ho₁: There is no significant difference between teachers' awareness of learning centres based on gender.

Ho₂: There is no significant difference between teachers' knowledge of the importance of learning centres based on gender.

Ho₃: There is no significant difference between teachers' awareness of learning centres based on educational qualification.

Ho₄: There is no significant difference between the teachers' knowledge of the importance of learning centres based on educational qualification.

Methodology

The design for this study was descriptive research survey type. Descriptive survey research design enables researcher to simply look with intense accuracy at the phenomenon of the moment and describes precisely what the he or she sees (Adewumi, 2002). The population for this study comprised of all the pre-primary and primary school teachers in Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State. Simple random sampling technique was adopted for this study, so that every element of the sample had equal change of being selected. Ten private and ten public schools were randomly selected and 10 teachers were randomly selected from each of the schools selected through and this made a total of 200 respondents. Two instruments tagged Teachers' Awareness of Learning Centre (TALC) and Teachers' Knowledge of importance of Learning Centres (TKILC) were used to collect the data for the study. The instruments were validated for face and content. The items of TALC and TKILC showed no ambiguities in the test items. TALC and TKILC were also

tested for reliability using 20 pre-school and primary school teachers who were not part of the study sample. Using test-retest method and using Cronbach Alphas the reliability index for Teachers' Awareness of Learning Centres was 0.83 while Teachers' Knowledge of Importance of Learning Centres yielded reliability index of 0.87. Data gathered were analyzed using descriptive statistics namely percentages, frequency counts, mean and standard deviation while inferential statistic of t-test were used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of teachers' awareness of what learning centres are in Ilorin South Local government Area?

Table 1: Teachers' Level of Awareness of Learning Centres

SCORES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	MEAN	STD D.
0	19	9.5		
1	3	1.5		
5	8	4.0		
10	11	5.5		
15	19	9.5		
20	29	14.5		
25	28	14.0		
30	42	21.0		
35	13	6.5	24.14	14.764
40	7	3.5		
45	6	3.0		
50	5	2.5		
55	5	2.5		
60	2	1.0		
65	2	1.0		
70	1	.5		
TOTAL	200	100.0		

Table 1 shows that 19 or 9.5% of the teachers scored 0 marks on awareness of learning centres. 3 or 1.5% scored 1 mark, 8 or 4.0% scored 5 marks, 11 or 5.5% scored 10 marks, 19 or 9.5% scored 15 marks, 29 or 14.5% scored 20 mark, 28 or 14.0% scored 25 marks. Also, 42 or 21.0% scored 30 marks, 13 or 6.5% scored 35 marks, 7 or 3.5% scored 40 marks while 6 or 3.0% scored 45 marks. Lastly, 5 or 2.5% scored 50 marks, 5 or 2.5% scored 55 marks, 2 or 1.0% scored 60 marks, 2 or 1.0% scored 65 marks while only 1 or .5% scored 70 marks. The mean score is 24.14 and the standard deviation is 17.764. This indicates that teachers' awareness of learning centres is very low.

Research Question 2: What is the level of teachers' knowledge of the importance of learning centres?

Table 2: Teachers' knowledge of importance of learning centres

S/N	ITEMS	YES (F) (%)	NO (F) (%)	MEAN	STD. D
1	Learning centres respect children learning styles and interest	41 20.5	159 79.5	1.21	.405
2	Learning centres develop unique content knowledge in children	37 18.5	153 76.5	1.24	.425
3	Learning centres promote social skills and work habits in children	37 18.5	163 81.5	1.19	.389
4	Learning centres provide opportunity for children to learn through hand on activities	39 19.5	161 80.5	1.21	.440
5	Learning centres can encourage learning to be active and student centred	39 19.5	161 80.5	1.20	.397
6	Learning centres can allow small group of children to work together without interruption	52 26.0	148 74.0	1.26	.440
7	Learning centres make children more easily able to locate materials	43 21.5	157 78.5	1.22	.412
8	Through learning centres children could work independently	45 22.5	155 77.5	1.23	.419
9	Learning centres allow children choices which helps in fostering their self esteem	57 28.5	143 71.5	1.29	.453
10	Learning centres help children to have less disruptive behaviour	52 26.0	148 74.0	1.26	.440

Table 2 shows that 41 or 20.5% learning centres respect children learning styles and interest while 159 or 79.5 did not. It further shows that 37 or 18.5% of the teachers agreed that learning centres develop unique content knowledge in children while 153 or 76.5% did not. Still, 37 or 18.5% agreed that learning centres promote social skills and work habits in children while 163 or 81.5% of the teachers disagreed. Again it shows that 39 or 19.5% agreed that learning centres provide opportunity for children to learn through hand on activities while 161 or 80.5% disagreed. It further shows that 39 or 19.5% of the teachers agreed that learning centres can encourage learning to be active and student centred while 161 or 80.5% disagreed. Furthermore, 52 or 26.0% agreed that learning centres can allow small group of children to work together without interruption while 148 or 74.0% disagreed. It shows that 43

or 21.5% of the teachers agreed that learning centres make children more easily able to locate materials while 157 or 78.5% disagreed. Again, 45 or 22.5% of the teachers agreed that through learning centres children could work independently while 155 or 77.5% disagreed. Still, 57 or 28.5% agreed that learning centres allow children choices which help in fostering their self-esteem while 143 or 71.5% of the teachers disagreed. Lastly, 52 or 26.0% of the teachers agreed that learning centres help children to have less disruptive behaviour while 148 or 74.0% disagreed.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between teachers' awareness of learning centres on the basis of their gender

Table 3: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between teachers' awareness of learning centres on the basis of their gender

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
Male	76	23.09	14.921	-	19	.433	Not Significant
Female	124	24.78	14.691	.785	8		

Table 3 presents the difference between gender and teachers awareness of learning centres. It shows that there is no significant difference between gender and teachers awareness of learning centres ($t = -.785$; $df = 198$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 1 accepted.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between teachers' knowledge of importance of learning centres on the basis of their gender.

Table 4: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between teachers' knowledge of importance of learning centres based of their gender.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
Male	76	23.09	14.921	3.070	19	.002	Significant
Female	124	24.78	14.691		8		

Table 4 presents the difference between teacher's gender and teacher's knowledge of learning centres. It shows that there is a significant difference between teachers' gender and their knowledge of learning centres ($t = 3.070$; $df = 198$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 2 is rejected and the alternative accepted.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the teachers awareness of learning centres based on their qualification.

Table 5: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between the teachers awareness of learning centres and teachers qualification

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
SSCE	19	3.42	.838	1.189	198	.237	Not Significant
NCE and above	181	3.48	.861				

Table 5 presents the significant difference between the teachers awareness of learning centres and teachers qualification. It shows that there is no significant difference between teachers awareness of learning centres and teachers' qualification ($t = 1.189$; $df = 198$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 3 is accepted.

Hypothesis 4: There is no significant difference between the teachers knowledge of learning centres and teachers qualification.

Table 6: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between the teachers knowledge of importance of learning centres based on their qualification

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	T	Df	Sig.	Remark
SSCE	19	18.95	12.756	2.159	198	.033	Significant
NCE and Above	181	26.51	14.119				

Table 6 presents the difference between teacher's knowledge of learning centres and teachers' qualification. It shows that there is significant difference between teachers knowledge of learning centres and teacher qualification ($t = 2.159$; $df = 198$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore null hypothesis 4 is rejected and the alternative is accepted.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that teachers' awareness of learning centres is totally unsatisfactory. This indicates that teachers do not have awareness of learning centres. This result did not agree with the National Association of Education for Young Children's standard that recommends that teachers need to create an intellectually engaging responsive environment to promote each child's learning and development (NAEYC, 2005). Children need supportive environment that nurtures their social, emotional, physical, ethical, civic,

creative and cognitive development (Isbell & Exelby, 2001; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010).

The result also showed that teachers did not have knowledge of importance of learning centres. The finding was not in conformity with the submission of Copple and Bredekamp (2006) who emphasized that children need time to think and manipulate materials for deep learning to occur, and that teachers should prepare play and other experiences in which children engage in active learning to promote development in all domains. The result also did not agree with Brickart & Jablon (1994) submission that offering children genuine choices that are intentionally developed by a knowledgeable teacher promotes competence and independence as well as more academic learning in all children. The centres help teachers to put the child at the focus of their decision making where children should be.

It was also found that teachers' gender has no influence on their awareness and their knowledge of importance of learning centres. The result suggests that the teachers' gender does not determine their knowledge of and awareness of learning centres. This is not in agreement with Lamb (2000) who observed differences in the way and manner teachers organize the learning environment for children. He observed that the way male teacher care for the pupils in the classroom is not encouraging.

In addition, the study revealed that teachers' qualification does not influence their awareness of learning centres. This result was in agreement with the assertion of Whitebook (2003) who asserted that the number of years of experience and teachers' qualification are not good indicators of teachers' awareness of classroom learning centres. The finding did not conform with Berk (1985) who found that overall education is related to positive teachers' behaviours and a study by Whitebook (2003) which revealed that teachers with the most advanced education were the most effective overall.

Conclusion

From the study, it can be concluded that teachers' awareness of learning centres is low and they do not have knowledge of the importance of learning centres. Also, that teachers' gender has no influence on their awareness of learning centres while it has on their knowledge of importance of learning centres. Likewise, teachers' qualification does not determine their awareness of learning centres but influences their knowledge of importance of learning centres.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Courses on learning centres should be included in the curriculum and the training of early childhood and primary education teachers. This will be a means to ensure that they are adequately trained in creating

learning centres to encourage pupils' learning and growth in all areas of development.

2. Also, that workshop, training and re-training should be organized for teachers in the field to educate them about learning centres and their importance.

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