

ASSESSING THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CLIMATE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

A child's learning environment is a useful tool toward the effective learning and development of the child and it should be considered in its physical and social parts. Hence, the paper assessed the physical and social climate of early childhood education learning environment in Kwara State. Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. One hundred and fifty (150) early childhood schools were selected from the sixteen Local Government Areas of Kwara State. Two research questions were answered and two hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Early Childhood Education Learning Environment Checklist-ECELEC ($r=0.78$) was used for data collection. Data were analysed using descriptive statistic and t-test statistic. The result showed that the quality of physical and social climate of learning environment of childhood schools in Kwara State was poor and there was significant difference between public and private schools in terms of qualities in childhood learning environment. Recommendation was made that the stakeholders especially, government owned schools should improve on the quality of both social and physical climate of early childhood schools to allow children grow optimally.

Keywords: Assessment, Early childhood education's learning environment, Physical climate, Social climate

Introduction

The core business of schools is to provide students with a rich learning environment that is open, respectful, caring and safe. Learning environment optimizes wellbeing. It reflects a positive school ethos that makes the school an exciting, stimulating and welcoming place. Learning environment is a factor that aids successful learning. For a child to respond favourably in the process of teaching and learning, the environment must be practicable, stable and conducive for learning. If an environment is unsuited or hostile to the child and the child cannot adapt to it, the child may survive but just barely. Environment makes a significant difference to children's learning when they are carefully planned, using methodology that are interactive, practical and enjoyable and prepared effectively to facilitate children's learning.

10 Bullard (2010) and Bredekamp (2011) submitted that learning environment means all the influences that affect children and adults in early childhood classroom. These include the planned arrangement of physical space, the relationship between the people, the contents, values and goals of a particular classroom (Centre for Child Education in Africa, 2003). Smith (2005) was of the opinion that early childhood learning environment should have a safe building and play grounds, good sanitation, adequate ware and toilet facilities, a school nutrition programme, spacious classroom, good ventilation and illumination, a healthful school days and provision of emergency services.

Learning environment in early childhood considers its physical and social parts. The physical climate includes such elements as the space, room management, schedule, equipment, and materials. Balogun (2000) supported this assertion that learning environment is all physical and material resources otherwise known as infrastructures available to teachers and students to enhance their teaching and learning activities. The physical environment involves creating environment that safely supports the needs of developing children through selection of appropriate, supplies and furnishings and arrangement of those items in indoor and outdoor play and learning experiences which support all aspects of children's learning and invite conversations between children. The social environment comprises the interactions between and among children and adults that include content experiences, values, goals of every environment. This focuses on relationship building among children and adults. For example, the social environment provides opportunities for offering children many opportunities for teacher-child interactions and child-child interactions as they engage in self-directed learning experiences in a flexible small and large group situations. It also deals with teacher giving a supportive role, leading the children to possible solutions by asking open-ended questions and scaffolding the problem solving process. Both physical and social environment interact to complement and enhance the intellectual, social, emotional and physical development of a child. Learning experiences are planned so that there are multiple opportunities for children to acquire new skills, knowledge and understanding and consolidate existing ones at their own rate, in their own ways with support readily available from adults and other children as needed. Schedules include active and quiet learning activities, large group, small group and indoor and outdoor activities.

The concept of high quality learning environment for children is built upon several theories. Montessori educators speak of the prepared environment to signify the need for thoughtfully planning of the spaces and places in which young children will work and play. Montessori defended the idea that children should be enabled to learn on their own in a set environment where they choose their own materials. The learning environment is set by the teacher after objectively organizing the materials from simple to complex. The educators from Reggio Emilia spoke of the environment as the third teacher to signify the importance of the environment in supporting children's learning. The space must be conducive for research and autonomous discovery, both for individual children and for groups of children

working together. An enormous amount of attention and effort should go into the design of furniture and organisation of space and materials to maximise the ease of use by the children (Reggio Emilia, 1994). Also, High scope developed ingredients of active learning which was based on abundant age appropriate materials that appeal to children's senses and can be used in a variety of ways. Children have opportunities to explore, manipulate, combine and transform the materials chosen. Learning results from the child's attempts to pursue personal interests and goals, the opportunity for children to choose activities and materials is considered to be essential. The Waldorf early childhood educators advocated environment that nourishes the senses. They work with the young child by creating a warm, beautiful and loving environment which is protective and secure. They emphasized that domestic, practical and artistic activities that the children can easily imitate should be the focus of the learning environment. Teachers nurture the children's power of imagination by telling carefully selected stories by encouraging free play.

Together these theories make up the total principles of creating a high quality learning environment in early childhood education. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) submitted that a high quality learning environment must create a caring community of learners. One in which all participants consider and contribute to one another's well-being and learning. It must support children's positive relationships in a respectful setting to develop healthy relationships with others, and to learn about themselves and their world. Also, high-quality learning environments are organised, challenging, and aesthetically pleasing. For children to respond favourably to an environment, it must be predictable, stable and comprehensive to them and pleasant places to be (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hendrick & Weissman, 2006; NAEYC, 2005). Goals are an essential element of the social environment therefore a high-quality learning environments reflect clear goals. The goals of every classroom are expressed directly in the arrangement and relationships of the environment (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2004).

In addition, feeling safe and secure is an indispensable component of both social and physical learning environment. A high-quality learning environment protects children's health and safety needs which includes adequate space and appropriate entrances and exits, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and a balance between active, sensory stimulation and quiet opportunities for reflection, a consistent, predictable relationship with a caring adult, positive expectations, strong peer acceptance, and respect for children as they are. Likewise, developmentally appropriate practice is highly advocated for in early childhood education, therefore, a high-quality learning environments must provide age-appropriate materials and equipment that match children's abilities and interests. Such materials are open-ended, they offer flexibility, variety, and multiple uses for children of different ages and abilities, safe, durable, nontoxic, well designed, and have a good workmanship (Bullard, 2010; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010).

Creating a high quality learning environment is based on what we know about children's growth, development, and learning. The differences in environments can

be found in children's opportunities to become a member of a community of learners, the classroom organization, the attention to goals and outcomes, the protection of children's health and safety, and children's access to age-appropriate materials and learning experiences. A high quality learning environment according to Kerka (1999) nurtures learning and provides the necessary resources and time for investigative play and experimentation. It is one in which children are free and motivated to make choices and explore for answers without feeling intimidated (Schirmacher, 2006). Danko-McGhee (2009) supported this idea by submitting that such an environment is one where physical space nurtures concentration, creativity and the motivation to independently learn and explore.

Children are totally dependent and they move from dependence towards independence throughout childhood. In order to survive and develop during this period of dependence, they need care, security, protection, stimulation and social contract. Most times in the society, children have most common been nurtured and cared for within the school setting. Busari (2011) opined that the school assumes different roles as the child develop, appropriate activities to satisfy his needs. Therefore, stability of the school and learning environment is a significant factor to child's development. Environment is an important factor to learner's ability to learn, it is among the variables that affect the nature of teaching and learning process and its outcome that in turn may or may not be productive in achieving the destined education goals. Children should have opportunities to experience much of their learning (Centre for Child Education in Africa, 2003). The quality of the care and education given by any school can be attributed to the environment in the early years where learning is planned for and supported. It is more than a classroom or activity room and includes the outdoors. Environment that support learning are vibrant and edible space that are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child.

Balogun (2002) noted that in Nigerian the quality of our school environment is far from ideal one, especially in the rural areas and public schools. The health of the school population and education are interdependent, without health, the school child cannot benefit from the learning in school. Pupils' loss of interest in education and their retarded growth most times have been probably identified with the fact that their learning environments are not fascinating for lack of needed materials and inadequate of facilities needed for teaching and learning. It therefore becomes imperative for educators to make regular assessment of the quality of early childhood learning environment. Based on these contexts, this research evaluated the quality of early childhood education learning environment of public and private schools in Kwara State, Nigeria.

The environment in which children are expected to grow is so important to the learning process that it has been regarded as a third teacher. The teaching and learning of a child is influenced by the quality of the learning environment. Most pupils have lost interests in education, probably because their learning environments are not captivating and lack needed materials as well as adequate facilities and support needed for learning and development. Various researches have been carried out on child's education and learning environment with a focus on the quality of

teaching and learning in schools and not on assessment of the physical and social climate of the learning environment. Therefore, there is the need to assess the quality of social and physical learning environment of early childhood schools in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Research Questions and Research Hypotheses

The study answered the following questions:

- 1 What is the quality of physical learning environment of childhood schools in Kwara State?
- 2 What is the quality of social climate learning environment of childhood in Kwara State?

The following research hypotheses were tested in the study:

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference between the quality of physical learning environment of public and private childhood schools.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the quality of social learning environment of public and private childhood schools.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was the descriptive survey. The population for this study comprised all pre-primary and lower basic schools in Kwara State. Ten local government areas and one hundred and fifty schools were randomly selected. Fifteen schools were sampled from each local government selected for the study. A checklist titled "Early Childhood Education Learning Environment Checklist-ECELEC" was constructed used to collect data for the study. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, copies of the instrument were administered in twenty schools which did not partake in the study. The split half reliability coefficient of 0.78 was obtained. The data gathered were analysed using descriptive and t-test statistics at the 0.05 level of significance.

Result

The data collected were analysed with percentage as shown on a frequency distribution table to provide answers to the research questions while the t-test was used for testing the stated hypotheses.

Research Question 1: What is the quality of physical learning environment of early childhood schools in Kwara State?

Table 1: Quality of Physical Learning Environment of Childhood Schools

S/N	ITEMS	YES (%)	NO (%)
1	Have large spaces for the whole group to meet comfortably	114 (76.0)	36 (24.0)
2	Have small spaces where two or three children can work together	102 (68.0)	48 (32.0)
3	Offer quite spaces where for individual tasks and privacy	77 (51.3)	73 (48.7)
4	Provide soft spaces with rugs, pillows, or cushions that make the room warm and inviting.	35 (23.3)	115 (76.7)
5	Provide materials that are easily accessible, aesthetically pleasing, organized and that invite exploration	51 (34.0)	99 (66.0)
6	Have a range of culturally sensitive materials.	59 (39.3)	91 (60.7)
7	Consider safety in available materials, supplies and equipment.	84 (56.0)	66 (44.0)
8	Have designated learning centre.	59 (39.3)	91 (60.7)
9	Use movable walls, furniture, book cases to divide centres.	39 (26.0)	111 (74.0)
10	Provide appropriate spaces for individuals and small groups of children according to their ages, physical sizes, interest and abilities?	91 (60.7)	59 (39.3)
11	Have places for games and paths for wheels toys	67 (44.7)	83 (55.3)
12	Containing interesting and challenging plays for climbing, swinging and balancing.	60 (40.0)	90 (60.0)
13	Offer a pleasant area to enjoy the natural elements and visually appealing look.	91 (60.7)	59 (39.3)
14	Provide varied ground surfaces such as hard top for games and vehicles, grass, soft, mulch or sand	63 (42.0)	87 (68.0)
15	Offer easy access to coast, toilet and drinking fountains.	56 (37.3)	94 (62.7)
16	Have shaded areas, benches, tables and support materials for group activities.	73 (48.7)	77 (51.3)
17	Provide independent and creative flexible material such as sand and water.	64 (42.7)	86 (57.3)
18	Provide materials for gross motor and fine motor development.	72 (48.0)	78 (52.0)
19	Provide for children's interaction with materials peers and adult.	60 (40.0)	90 (60.0)
20	Have adults active supervision.	48 (32.0)	102 (68.0)
21	Have accessibility, materials and equipment for children of all abilities and disabilities	18 (12.0)	132 (88.0)

Table 1 presents the quality of physical learning environment of childhood schools. It shows that 36 or 24.0% of the schools have large spaces for the whole group to meet comfortably while 114 or 76.0% of the schools did not. It further shows that 48 or 32.0% of the visited schools have small spaces where two or three children can work together while 102 or 68.0% did not. It further revealed that 77 or 51.3% of the schools visited offer quiet spaces where for individual tasks and privacy while 73 or 48.7% of the schools did not. Again it reveals that 35 or 23.3% of the schools provide soft spaces with rugs, pillows, or cushions that make the room warm and inviting while 115 or 76.7% of the schools did not make the provision.

Further it shows that 51 or 34.0% of the visited schools provide materials that are easily accessible, aesthetically pleasing and organized and that invite exploration while 99 or 66.0% of the schools did not. A total of 59 or 39.3% of the schools have a range of culturally sensitive materials while 91 or 60.7% of the schools did not. 84 or 56.0% of the schools considered safety in available materials, supplies and equipment while 66 or 44.0% of the schools did not. 59 or 39.3% of the schools have designated learning centres while 91 or 60.7 schools did not. 39 or 26.0% of the schools use movable walls, furniture, book cases to divide centres while 111 or 74.0% of the schools did not. It also shows that 91 or 60.7% of the schools have appropriate spaces for individuals and small groups of children according to their ages, physical sizes, interest and abilities while 59 or 39.3% of the schools did not. Also, 67 or 44.7% of the schools have places for games and paths for wheels toys while 83 or 55.3% of the schools did not.

Few of the schools or 60 or 40.0% of the schools visited have an outdoor environment containing interesting and challenging plays for climbing, swinging and balancing while the majority of the schools 90 or 60.0% of the schools did not. Again, 91 or 60.7% of the schools offer a pleasant area to enjoy the natural elements and visually appealing look while 59 or 39.3% of the schools did not. Still, 63 or 42.0% of the schools visited provide varied ground surfaces such as hard top for games and vehicles, grass, soft, mulch or sand while 87 or 63.0 of the schools did not. Furthermore, 56 or 37.7% of the visited schools offer easy access to coast, toilet and drinking fountains while 94 or 62.7% of the schools did not. In the same vein, 73 or 48.7% of the visited schools have shaded areas, benches, tables and support materials for group activities while 77 or 51.3% of the visited schools do not.

Moreover, 64 or 42.7% of the schools provide independent and creative flexible material such as sand and water while 86 or 57.3% of the schools did not. 72 or 48.0% of the schools provide materials for gross motor and fine motor development while 78 or 52.0% of the schools visited do not. Still, 60 or 40.0% of the visited schools provide for children's interaction with materials peers and adult while 90 or 60.0% of the schools visited do not. Again, 48 or 32.0% of the schools visited have adult and active supervision while 102 or 68.0% do not. Lastly, 18 or 12.0% of the schools visited have accessibility, materials and equipment for children of all abilities and disabilities while 132 or 88.0% of the schools do not.

Research Question 2: *What is the quality of social climate of learning environment of early childhood in Kwara State?*

Table 2: Quality of social climate of learning environment of childhood schools

S/N	ITEMS	YES (%)	NO (%)
22	Invite the participation of children	53 (35.3)	97 (64.7)
23	Display positively worded signs and messages	76 (50.7)	74 (49.3)
24	Represent the children's lives and interest throughout the room with work samples, photographs, sketches and cultural artifacts.	61 (40.7)	89 (59.3)
25	Use language that is welcoming, accepting and responsive to all children, families and adults	30 (20.0)	120 (80.0)
26	Encourage children to work together	30 (20.0)	120 (80.0)
27	Demonstrate warm, positive relationship and support children's friendship.	38 (25.3)	112 (74.4)

Table 2 presents the quality of social climate learning environment of early childhood schools. It shows that 53 or 35.3% of the schools assessed invite the participation of children while 97 or 64.7% of the schools did not. Further, 76 or 50.7% of the schools assessed display positively worded signs and messages while 74 or 49.3% of the schools did not. Again, of the assessed schools 61 or 40.7% represent the children's lives and interest throughout the room with work samples, photographs, sketches and cultural artifacts while 89 or 59.3% of the schools did not. Also, 30 or 20.0% of the schools assessed use language that is welcoming, accepting and responsive to all children, families and adults while 120 or 80.0% of the schools did not. 30 or 20.0% of the assessed schools encourage children to work together while 120 or 80.0% of the schools did not. Lastly, the table shows that 38 or 25.3% of the schools assessed demonstrate warm, positive relationship and support children's friendship while 112 or 74.4% of the schools did not

Hypothesis 1: *There is no significant difference between the quality of physical learning environment of childhood school of public and private schools.*

Table 3: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between quality of physical learning environment of childhood public and private schools

Variable	N	Mean	Std.D	Cal t	Df	Sig.	Remark
Physical learning environment							
Public	79	1.42	.496	-5.191	148	.000	Significant
Private	71	1.80	.401				

Table 3: presents the difference between the quality of the physical learning environment and public and private schools. It shows that there is significant difference between the physical learning environments of private and public schools ($t = -5.191$; $df = 148$; $p < 0.05$) therefore the null hypothesis 1 is rejected and the alternative is accepted.

Hypothesis 2: *There is no significant difference between the quality of social learning environment of childhood public and private schools.*

Table 4: Summary of t-test analysis of difference between quality of social learning environment of childhood public and private schools

Variable	N	Mean	Std. D	Cal t	Df	Sig.	Remark
Social Learning environment							
Public schools	79	1.70	.459	2.805	198	.006	Significant
Private schools	71	1.50	.504				

Table 4 presents the difference between quality of social learning environment of childhood public and private schools. It shows that there is significant difference between the quality of social learning environment of childhood public and private schools ($t = 2.905$; $df = 198$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis 4 is rejected and the alternative is accepted.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of the study revealed that the quality of outdoor learning environment in both private and public schools in Kwara State is poor. This is in agreement with the findings of McCain & Mustard (1999) that the outdoor learning environment in early childhood school were not effectively managed, well organized and arranged. This finding is also confirmed by Lee & Chang (2000); Kimmel et al, (2000) and Khattar et al, (2003) who reported that learning environment of many of early childhood classrooms was so poor and that it even affected learning process and development of children. The result also showed that the quality of physical learning environment of childhood schools in private school is fairly better than the public schools in Kwara State. This result corroborated Jekayinfa (2005) who observed that the learning environment in many public schools is not stimulating and not attractive for pupils to learn. This is a serious issue in early childhood education schools because this level of education is funded by the government there is challenges of funding limitations which results in poor and discouraging physical climate in public schools.

Further, the findings of the study revealed that the quality of social climate learning environment of childhood schools in private and public schools in Kwara State is below average. This is in consonance with the finding of Adeshina (2000) that the social atmosphere created in schools was poor. Many teachers do not demonstrate warm, positive relationship and support children's friendship. This can be as a result of teachers' attempt to maintain discipline and order in the classroom to ensure

maximum learning of the pupils. However, classroom discipline is not the same thing as punishment as many people had thought but punishment is only one way of ensuring a conducive learning climate as good classroom management is the key to classroom success. (Jekayinka, 2005).

The findings of the study further showed a significant difference between public and private schools in terms of qualities in childhood learning environment. The environment of childhood schools in both private and public schools of Kwara State are poor but the quality of physical learning environment of childhood schools in private school in Kwara State is a little better than the public schools in Kwara State. This result supported Oyesola (2004) that observed the state of pupils in public educational institutions sitting on bare floors or strictly on rickety desks in classrooms.

Conclusion

Based on the result, it was concluded that the quality of childhood education learning environment in public and private schools is poor. However, the quality of physical learning environment of private childhood schools is a little better than the public schools in Kwara State. Also, the quality of social climate of learning environment of childhood schools in both private and public schools in Kwara State is below average.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. All stakeholders involved in the care and education of young children both in private and public schools should frequently improve on the quality of physical and social learning environment in early childhood schools..
2. Since the quality of physical learning environment of childhood schools in private schools is a little better than that of public schools, the government needs to make notable investment to improve the quality of physical learning environment in Kwara State public schools.
3. There should be training and retraining of teachers to enable them have a paradigm shift in pedagogical approach and provide multiple opportunities for children to acquire new skills, knowledge.
4. Government through Universal Basic Education (UBEC) and State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) should provide standard for every school to follow and also provide adequate monitoring and supervision to ensure no school deviates from the standard.

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