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An Evaluation of Early Childhood Educators' Knowledge of Their Professional Code of Conduct

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ABSTRACTS

Teachers of young children have precise responsibilities towards children and their families, colleagues at workplaces as well as the community. This study assessed how knowledgeable early childhood educators are in terms of their professional code of conduct. Four research questions were answered and three hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance. Two hundred (200) respondents were randomly sampled to participate in the study. A validated instrument tagged "ECE Professional Code Test" (ECEPCT) with a reliability coefficient of 0.73 was used to collect data for the study. Findings revealed that early childhood educators' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the children, their families, and the community was low while the level of their knowledge of their responsibilities towards their colleagues was high. In addition, it was revealed that gender, academic qualification, and school type have no significant influence on early childhood educators' knowledge of their professional code of conduct. Because of these outcomes, it was recommended that issues on professional ethics and code of conduct should be incorporated and emphasized during pre-service training of early childhood educators as well as during seminars and re-training of in-service caregivers/teachers. In addition, a handbook on professional ethics and code of conduct for early childhood educators should be made available and accessible to all caregivers and teachers of young children.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching as a profession has a noteworthy record of service anywhere in the world. It is usually considered as the bedrock out of which other professions spring forth. The front liners in any society are teachers whose role remains significant for individual and national growth and development. Teachers remain the prime investment in quality education delivery. Their duty as presumed by many is not limited to imparting knowledge or disseminating information only. Teachers play an all-encompassing role in creating stimulating learning environments that enhance the all-round development of their learners. Teachers are role models, they take responsibility for understanding and meeting the needs of individual learners as well as instil moral values in them which usually become lifelong virtues.

Like every other profession, the dignity of teaching is guided by rules and regulations also known as code of conduct. The code guiding the conduct of professionals in education is generally put together by educators. The document contains the obligations that teachers have towards their learners, their parents or guardians as well as to their colleagues. The major principles found in the code delineate the connections between each educator and the children and their families, the school management, and members of other multi-disciplinary teams. In many nations of the world, teachers especially professional childhood educators have been saddled with the responsibility of educating their children. This unique responsibility however requires uncompromised behavioural standards and unwavering professional conduct.

It is worth mentioning that, the quality of the service that professional early childhood educators provide has a direct impact on the nation and its young citizens who are the future leaders. Among the numerous responsibilities of early childhood educators according to NAEYC is providing adequate care and quality education for children in safe environments that are dynamic, nurturing, and aware of each child's needs. In addition, they offer a clean, inspiring, loving, and comprehensive environment for children. It is also the responsibility of these professionals to plan, prepare, and implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum to foster the all-round development of children as well as employ various pedagogical skills to meet each child's needs.

Families and early childhood educators have a common goal which is to ensure the total wellbeing of the child. NAEYC recognizes the significant role of families in the nurturing and development of children, hence partnership between home and school is acknowledged. It was affirmed by the Association of American Educators that parents are a crucial agent in the moral education of children. Nevertheless, all teachers, early childhood educators inclusive are duty-bound to help foster qualities such as integrity, diligence, accountability, cooperation, reliability, and respect for the rule of law and human lives which would enhance productivity in learners' future endeavours.

For effectiveness and high productivity in any place of work, human dignity is appreciated, professional satisfaction is encouraged, and valuable relationships are formed and sustained. The primary responsibility of early childhood educators to their co-workers is to institute and uphold functional relationships that bring about productivity as well as professional needs and development. In addition, they have a responsibility and commitment towards their employer by providing the best service and also not involving anything that will tarnish the image of the school where they work except it has to do with violation of rules and regulations established to protect children.

All early childhood programs or schools are situated in the community which comprises families and other agencies working for the general wellbeing of children. The role of early

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childhood educators in the community includes meeting the diverse needs of families, work together with agencies and other professional bodies that share the responsibility of young children. They also help families to gain access to relevant organizations and allied experts. In addition, they give support in the development of community programs.

NAEYC as a body provides high-quality programs to foster the care and education for children with high integrity. Due to their specialized know-how in the development and education of children, and the shared responsibility of the larger society for the wellbeing of young children, NAEYC recognizes a cooperative commitment to advocate and be a voice for children within the early childhood programs and in the community at large.

Ethical principles are based on established standards of what is right and wrong which prescribes what humans are expected to do, usually in terms of rights, duties, justice, or specific qualities. It is also viewed as a set of frameworks of professional responsibilities that outlines the standards for which a particular group or organization works. The set of moral principles that individuals or groups of persons may hold because they regard those principles as being following their professional conduct. Ethics incorporates actions, behaviors, conduct expected of professionals as well as rules and regulations stated based on the profession of an individual. The different profession has their ethical conduct of operation aimed at achieving the stated principles guiding their members in their relationship with clients, the establishment they are working for, their colleagues, and the community.

A professional code of conduct outlines the principles that govern decisions and behavior in an organization. In the field of early childhood education, professional ethical conduct gives a general outline of how teachers/caregivers should behave as well as specific guidance for handling children, their families, colleagues and the community members at large. NAEYC categorized the professional ethical conduct of early childhood education into four sections that specify standards of ethical behaviors and responsibilities. These are responsibilities towards children, their families, colleagues, and the community.

NAEYC as a body also gives direction through the ethical code of the profession to practitioners who are faced with sticky situations. Each section of the professional code of conduct contains the main beliefs and the standards which help early childhood professionals reflect on what they would do with children in their care. It also addresses an area of specialized interactions with the children's family, co-workers, and the community being served. In addition, it consists of an introduction to the major responsibilities of early

Childhood practitioners and the principles guiding their conduct towards children. Previous studies on teachers' professional code of conduct focused on teachers' conduct and its implication on the academic performance of the students. Dimkpa (2015); Ashraf *et al.* (2018) measured the level of adherence of teachers to the ethical codes as well as its implication on professional behavior. Also, a broad-based study of teachers' codes of conduct with emphasis on attitudes of education leaders was conducted by Shapira-Lishchinsky (2020). In New Zealand, O'Neil and Bourke (2010) educated teachers about the ethics of their profession. This reveals the shallow level of the teachers' awareness of professional ethics. In Nigeria where this study is being carried out, it is not certain that teachers are very much aware or knowledgeable about the ethics of their profession.

It is however expected that the services provided by teachers, particularly those handling children should be of the best standard and their behavior should place the profession in the utmost admirable position in society. For this to be achieved, the ethics of the profession must be at the fingertips of every teacher. Because of this, this study sought to investigate how knowledgeable early childhood educators are on the issue of their professional code of

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conduct in terms of their responsibilities towards the children, their families, colleagues, and the community at large.

Research questions are

(i) What is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children?
(ii) What is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the families of the children?
(iii) To what extent is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards their colleagues?
(iv) What is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community?

Research hypotheses are

(i) There is no major difference in early childhood educators' level of knowledge of their professional code of ethics based on gender.
(ii) There is no significant disparity in early childhood educators' level of knowledge of their professional code of ethics based on academic qualification.

There is no significant difference in early childhood educators' level of knowledge of their professional code of ethics based on school type.

2. METHODS

A descriptive survey research design was adopted for this research. All Nursery and Primary school teachers in Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State constitute the population for the study. 20 schools (ten public and ten private) were randomly selected and from each school, ten teachers were randomly selected and a total of 200 teachers took part in the study. A validated tool tagged "ECE Professional Code Test" (ECEPCT) with a reliability coefficient of 0.73 was used to gather data for the study. Data generated through research questions were analyzed using frequency count, simple percentage, and meanwhile, hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using inferential statistics of t-test, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used for hypothesis 2. The hypotheses were all tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Question One: What is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children?

Table 1 shows the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children. 120 of the participants, representing 60.0%, had a low level of knowledge of their responsibilities to children while 80 of the participants, representing 40.0%, had a high level of knowledge of their responsibilities to children. The mean is 1.40 which is a numeric indicator that the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children was low.

Table 1. Level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children.

Responsibility	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Mean
Teachers' responsibilities towards children	120(60.0%)	80(40.0%)	1.40

Note: Low: 1.00-1.49 and High: 1.50-2.00

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3.2. Research Question Two: What is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the families of the children?

Table 2 shows the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the families of the Children. 136 of the participants, representing 68.0%, had a low level of knowledge of their Responsibilities towards the families of the children while 64 of the participants, representing 32.0%, had a high level of knowledge of their responsibilities towards the families of the children. The mean is 1.32 which is a numeric indicator that the level of teachers' knowledge of their Responsibilities towards the families of the children was low.

Table 2. Level of teacher's knowledge of their responsibilities towards the families of the children.

Responsibility	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Mean
Teachers' responsibilities towards the families of the children	136(68.0%)	64(32.0%)	1.32

Note: Low: 1.00-1.49 and High: 1.50-2.00

3.3. Research Question Three: to what extent is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities?

Table 3 shows the level of teachers' knowledge or their responsibilities towards their colleagues. 80 of the participants, representing 40.0%, had a low level of knowledge of their responsibilities towards their colleagues while 120 or tone participants, representing 60.0%, had a high level of knowledge of their responsibilities towards their colleagues. The mean is 1.60 which is a numeric indicator that the level of the teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities toward their colleagues was high.

Table 3. Level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards their colleagues.

Responsibility	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Mean
Teachers' responsibilities towards the families of the children	120(60.0%)	80(40.0%)	1.60

Note: Low: 1.00 149 and High: 1.50-2.00

3.4. Research Question Four: What is the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community?

Table 4 shows the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community. 140 of the participants, representing 70.0%, had a low level of knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community while 60 of the participants, representing 30.0%, had a high level of knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community. The mean is 1.30 which is a numeric indicator that the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community was low.

Table 4. Level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community.

Responsibility	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Mean
Teachers' responsibilities towards the community	140(70.0)	60(30.0)	1.30

Note: Low: 1.00- 1.49 and High: 1.50-2.00

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3.5. Research Hypothesis One: There is no major difference in teachers' level of knowledge of based on gender

Table 5 shows the difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on gender. There was no significant difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on gender. The hypothesis is therefore not rejected in the light of the result since the significance. This implies that gender had no significant influence on teachers' level of knowledge.

Table 5. The difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on gender.

Gender	N	Mean	Std. D	t	Df	Sig	Remark
Male	65	5.50	1.09				
				-1.57	198	0.117	Not Significant
Female	135	5.73	0.87				

3.6. Research Hypothesis Two: There is no significant disparity in teachers' level of knowledge based on academic qualification.

Table 6 shows the difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on academic qualification. There was no significant difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on academic qualification (F 4; 197) =0.995; P >0.05). The hypothesis is therefore not rejected in the light of the result since the significant value is greater than 0.05. This means that academic qualification had no significant influence on teachers' level of knowledge.

Table 6. Showing the difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on academic qualification.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Corrected Model	0.750	4	0.188	0.995	0.411
Intercept	6247.5000	1	6247.500	33150.000	0.000
Qualification	0.750	4	0.187	0.995	0.411
Error	36.750	195	188		
Total	7118.000	200			
Corrected Total	37.500	199			

3.7. Research Hypothesis 'Three: There is no significant difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on school ownership

Table 7 shows the difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on school ownership. There was no significant reference in teachers' level of knowledge based on school ownership (t=0.890, df = 198, P2 0.05). The hypothesis is therefore not rejected in the light of the result since the significant value is greater than 0.05. This implies the sch0ol ownership had no significant influence on teachers' level of knowledge.

Table 7. The difference in teachers' level of knowledge based on school ownership.

School Ownership	N	Mean	Std. D	T	Df	Sig	Remark
Public	100	5.72	8.8				
				0.890	198	0.375	Not Significant
Private	100	5.60	1.02				

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In general, the study revealed that the level of knowledge of early childhood educators of their professional code of conduct was low. O'Neill and Bourke (2010) also supported the findings through their research which affirm the need to educate teachers about ethical code, early childhood educators inclusive. This is evident in the answer to the questions that were raised in the study.

Results revealed that the level of early childhood educators' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children Ilorin East L.G.A. of Kwara State was low. This implies that the practitioners of early childhood education do not have substantial knowledge of both the ideals and the principles guiding their professional conduct. This negates the opinion of Liston and Garrison (2004) who emphasized the importance of teachers knowing their responsibilities towards the children they teach and care for. However, Campbell (2010) in her study revealed the need for increased knowledge of the responsibilities and principles guiding the teaching profession for improved practice and enhanced professionalism.

It was also shown that the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the families of the children was low. By implication, many of the teachers of young children are ignorant of what is embedded in the professional code of ethics for early childhood educators in terms of their responsibilities towards the families they serve, hence, their professionalism is questionable. This complements the assertion of Oduolowu and Agarry (2014) that only competent teachers would exhibit more professional self-assurance and improved quality of work.

The result further shows that the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards the community was low. It indicates that the majority of the early childhood educators in Ilorin East L.G.A. of Kwara State do not have adequate information of their professional responsibilities towards the community where they reside and/or work.The finding as he however emphasized the social responsibilities of teachers as not only to care for their learners but to understand and prepare them as well as show them how to fit into the future community.

In contrast to the preceding findings, the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards their colleagues was high. This shows that early childhood educators know the ideals and principles of what is expected of them regarding their professional conduct towards their colleagues. In support of the result, Ferrier-Kerr *et al*. (2009) agreed that collegial relationships are hugely important in any organization. In school settings, it allows for teachers to develop and discharge their duties more effectively as professionals. There is a healthy relationship between co-workers in a workplace like school, teachers can guide and positively impact each other, which makes for effective personal development and increased productivity.

The result further shows that gender, academic qualification, and school ownership have no significant influence on early childhood educators' knowledge of their professional responsibilities towards the families they serve, their colleagues, and the community. Business for Social Responsibilities however opposes the outcome as it established that women are more affected by code of conduct shortcomings and violations in workplaces than men.

4. CONCLUSION

It was concluded that the level of teachers' knowledge of their responsibilities towards children, their families, and the community is low. However, their knowledge of responsibilities towards their colleagues was found to be high. In addition, early childhood educators' gender, their academic qualification, and the ownership of the school where they

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work (public or private) all have no significant influence on the ECE practitioner's level of knowledge of their ethical code of conduct. Based on the study outcome, the following was recommended:

(i) Issues around professional ethics and code of conduct for early childhood educators should be incorporated into workshops and training organized for practicing teachers.

(ii) Also, a handbook on professional ethics and code of conduct for early childhood educators should be made available and accessible to practicing teachers as well as pre-service teachers.

(iii) Continuous professional development and knowledge-based test on ethical issues should be conducted occasionally by school owners and other relevant agencies. This will serve as a constant reminder of what is expected of them.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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