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**AN APPRAISAL OF CHILDCARE DELIVERY SERVICES IN ILORIN SOUTH
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, KWARA STATE**

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Abstract

Caring for children in childcare centres is a noble task that only those who are trained, emotionally stable and passionate about children thrive in. This study assessed childcare delivery services in Ilorin South Local Government Area, Kwara State. Twenty-seven (27) privately-owned centres were randomly selected to participate in the study. Descriptive research design of the survey type was adopted for study. Data collected through a checklist tagged "Checklist on Childcare Delivery Services" ($r = 0.77$) were analysed using descriptive statistics. It was revealed through the study that in most of the centres covered, the physical environment was adequate, the facilities needed for proper childcare delivery were available, the level of relationship between caregivers and children/families was high and the quality of children's experience in the child care delivery centres was high. From the study, it can be deduced that the quality of childcare delivery services in Ilorin South Local Government Area, Kwara State is relatively high.

Keywords: *Childcare, Childcare services, Physical environment, Childcare facilities, Caregivers*

Introduction

The early years in a child's life are very sensitive and critical. That is why early childhood experts make it a point of duty to advocate and ensure that the best services are provided for children and their families. It is considered a great aberration if a child is mishandled or ignored due parents' (especially mother) inability to devote time to care for the child. In a typical African society, one of the primary responsibilities of parents is to care and nurture the children until they are old enough to take responsibility for themselves. However, history have it that, at one point or the other, they have relied on other members of the family (older siblings), relatives and neighbours to care for their young ones while they are away to the farm, stream or market.

Although, enrolling children in a formal childcare centre was not a common practice in Africa because of the communal way of living and child rearing until recent times when mothers began to be involved in industrial works to support the family. Apart from their increased involvement in the labour force, Zigler and Stevenson (1996) confirmed that increasing rate of divorce, single-parent families and increased mobility of families are

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visible factors responsible for the increased demand of child care centres. According to Boschee and Jacobs (2006), the establishment of childcare centre was to alleviate the childcare problems of working parents, to prevent children from wandering on the streets as well as to reduce the rate of absenteeism by working nursing mothers. This is demonstrated by some establishments that create childcare centre commonly known as creche with skilled personnel to look after their employees' children. Although, parents most times are made to share in the cost of running of the centre.

Childcare in this discourse is referred to as the services or care given to children below the age of three within an instituted centre during the day. Specifically, between the hours 7am and 6pm while the parents are off for work. Practitioners in this centre basically are responsible for looking after young children in a setting either at daycare centres or private homes. They are responsible for providing children with a safe environment to play and learn and help children to develop basic behavioural and social skills (Click & Karkos, 2013). However, the age range of children admitted to the centres or homes varies depending on location of operation.

It is interesting to know that in some developed countries around the world like the United States, government's involvement in sponsoring the expansion of childcare and/or provision of childcare subsidies is becoming a very popular policy (Lovász, 2016). This policy is often motivated by a desire to facilitate maternal employment even though there is a wide belief that childcare and childhood programmes are beneficial for child development. A research according to Beststart Education and Care Centre (2015) reported that high level of quality child care delivery is actually beneficial to both mother and the child.

West (2016) expressed that parents usually do not have the capacity to raise their young ones and keep a job at the same time. That is why they have resolved to make the childcare centre a viable option. Childcare centres have been proven to offers long-lasting social, economic and academic benefits for children and their parents (National Institute of Child Health and Human Early Childcare Research Network Development, 2000). Studies have shown that children, including babies and infants from the ages of 6 months to 4 years, benefit from the childcare environment, including its quality instruction, structure and social lessons.

In addition, children learn how to share and take turns, practice making new friends, being part of a team and playing well with others. Childcare centres also help to improve children's communication skills, problem-solving, making compromise and conflict-resolution techniques. It encourages children to demonstrate cooperation, inclusion and compassion as well as ease separation anxiety as children interact with other children and adults who are not members of the immediate family. Children also learn to respect and listen to non-parent authority figures and also gives children time to adjust to school-like schedules and routines (Smith, 2016). All of these social skills help the child's transition to kindergarten or primary school successfully. This transition may not be possible without an enabling physical environment.

The physical environment of any organization right from the outside of the building either attract or repel potential clients. Being the first point of contact imprints a lasting

impression on their minds. Most parents are fascinated by the attractive physical environment and then convinced by the safety of the environment before enrolling their children at the centre. Exposing children to quiet, peaceful, stimulating environments have tremendous impact on their development (Olds, 2001; Isbell & Exelby, 2001). Also, understanding that young children are restless, explorers and risk takers make it essential to consciously set up a developmentally appropriate environment. In other words, child care centres are to provide children with the opportunity to explore freely in a spacious, well-lighted, cross ventilated and well-organized rooms.

Another yardstick to measure the quality of a childcare centre is the availability of facilities, that is, materials and equipment needed for children's wellbeing and interaction. According to Nebraska Department of Education (2017), setting up a safe environment and providing appropriate materials and equipment stimulate children's interest in learning, reduce behavioural problems, enhance all round development and also ease the caregivers of unnecessary stress. Also, Thornton (2016) affirmed that young children are more likely to get involved in play when there is plenty of fun, challenging and intriguing play materials. If the choice of materials matches closely to the interests and the developmental abilities of the children, each child will possibly become engaged in constructive play activities.

Parents and children are a two-in-one deal for care providers; hence, all early childhood programmes including daycare providers build alliances with parents to cultivate the mutually reinforcing environments for children at home and in early childhood centres (World Health Organisation, 2004; Gestwicki & Bertrand, 2011). In other words, caregivers' enhancing relationship with families particularly parents remain central to the quality of care children receives from the centre which in turn create an enabling climate for their optimal development (Pena, 2000; Epstein, 2011; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Keyser, 2006).

The experience of children while in childcare centres is an area that cannot be ignored. As infants and toddlers, they need physical contacts – cuddling, lapping and holding of hands when the child shows signs that he/she wants to be held (Tassoni, 2007). In other words, it is perfectly acceptable to hug a child, carry him on the lap and back him when necessary as this is part of the services the caregivers are expected to render. Moreover, these acts build reassurance in children as they feel safe and develop a relationship with their caregivers.

The quality of service provided has therefore become an issue of concern for many parents and early childhood education experts. Understanding the role of early childcare and education on young children's future success thus call for high quality service delivery by the care providers. The purpose of this study, thus, was to assess the quality of the physical environment, the availability of basic facilities needed for childcare delivery, the quality of relationship between caregivers and children/families as well as the quality of children's experience at the centres within Ilorin South Local Government Area of Kwara State.

Research Questions

- How adequate is the quality of the physical environment for safe childcare delivery at the centres?
- Are the basic facilities needed for childcare delivery sufficiently available at the centres?
- What is the level of relationship between caregivers and children/families?
- What is the quality of children's experience in the childcare delivery centres?

Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was adopted in this study. Twenty-seven (27) privately-owned childcare centres were purposively selected from educational institutions in Ilorin South, Kwara State to participate in the study. The selection was based on the fact that, as at the time of this research, there are no childcare centres operating in government primary schools in Ilorin South Local Government Area. An instrument titled "Checklist on Childcare Delivery Services" (CCDS) was developed by the researcher. It was validated by experts in Early Childhood Education and reliability co-efficient of 0.77 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha. The checklist consisted of Sections; A and B respectively. Section A focused on the demographic data while Section B comprised thirty-five (35) items on the checklist. The data collected for this study were analysed using the descriptive statistics of frequency count and simple percentage to ascertain the quality of service delivery at the selected childcare centres in Ilorin South, Kwara State.

Results

Research Question 1: How adequate is the quality of the physical environment for safe childcare delivery at the centres?

Table 1: Showing the adequacy of the Physical Environment of childcare delivery centres

S/ N	Items safety Environment and Safety	Not Adequate		Adequate	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Availability of security camera (CCTV)	27	100	-	-
2	Availability of security personnel	19	70.4	8	29.6
3	Availability of first aid kits	8	29.6	19	70.4
4	Well lighted/bright rooms	2	7.4	25	92.6
5	Hygienic environment (indoor and outdoor)	1	3.7	26	96.3
6	Attractive/child friendly environment	2	7.4	25	92.6
7	Quiet and peaceful environment	4	14.8	23	85.2
8	Well ventilated rooms	1	3.7	26	96.3

Table 1 showed that the physical environment for safe childcare delivery in most of the centre was adequate. The detailed analysis is as follows: Availability of security camera (CCTV) was rated 0%, Availability of security personnel was rated 29.6%, Availability of first aid kits 70.4%, Well lighted/bright rooms was rated 92.6%, Hygienic environment (indoor and outdoor) was rated 96.3%, Attractive/child friendly environment was rated 92.6,

Quiet and peaceful environment was rated 85.2% while Well ventilated rooms was rated 96.3%.

Research Question 2: Are the facilities needed for proper childcare delivery available at the centres?

Table 2: Showing the Availability of Facilities in Childcare Delivery Centres

S/N	ITEMS Facilities in Centre	Not Available		Available	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Enough space for children to move around	5	18.5	22	81.5
2	Water supply	13	48.1	14	51.9
3	Power supply	9	33.3	18	66.7
4	Refrigerator	25	92.6	2	7.4
5	Microwave/cooker/stove	16	59.3	11	40.7
6	Place for storage of children personal belongings	1	3.7	26	96.3
7	Baby cots/bed	2	7.4	25	92.6
8	Plenty and variety of toys	5	18.5	22	81.5
9	Television and DVD player	7	25.9	20	74.1
10	Child-sized furniture	8	29.6	19	70.4
11	Child-sized toilet	22	81.5	5	18.5
12	Child friendly floor	8	29.6	19	70.4

Table 2 shows that the facilities needed for proper child care delivery was available at many of the sampled centres. The detailed analysis is as follows: Enough space for children to move around was rated 81.5%, Water supply was rated 51.9%, Power supply was rated 66.7%, Refrigerator was rated 7.4%, Microwave/cooker/stove was rated 40.7%, Place for storage of children personal belongings was rated 96.3%, Baby cots/bed was rated 92.6%, Plenty and variety of toys was rated 81.5%, Television and DVD player was rated 74.1%, Child-sized furniture was rated 70.4%, Child-sized toilet was rated 18.5% and Child friendly floor was rated 70.4%.

Research Question 3: What is the level of relationship between caregivers and the children/families?

Table 3: Showing the level of Relationship between Caregivers and the Children/Families

S/N	ITEMS	Low		High	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Caregivers respect each child's uniqueness	13	48.1	14	51.9
2	Crying babies are easily calmed in the arms of their minders	1	3.7	26	96.3
3	Some children prefer to be fed by their minders	2	7.4	25	92.6
4	Children feel comfortable in the arms of their minders	16	59.3	11	40.7
5	Children express trust for the caregivers	4	14.5	23	85.2
6	Parents get feedback from minders at the end of each day	-	-	27	100
7	Caregivers freely call parents when there is need to do so	1	3.7	26	96.3

Table 3 showed that the level of relationship between caregivers and children/families is high. The detailed analysis is as follows: caregivers respect each child's uniqueness was rated 51.9%, crying babies are easily calmed in the arms of their minders was rated 96.3%, some children prefer to be fed by their minders was rated 92.6% children feel comfortable in the arms of their minders was rated 40.7%, children express trust for the caregivers was rated 85.2%, parents get feedback from minders at the end of each day was rated 100% and caregivers freely call parents when there is need to do so was rated 96.3%.

Research Question 4: What is the quality of children's experience in the childcare delivery centres?

Table 4: Showing the Quality of Children's Experience in the Childcare Delivery Centres

S/N	ITEMS relationship	NO		YES	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Crawling babies move around freely	-	-	27	100
2	Children's needs are tenderly responded to	-	-	27	100
3	Children are cuddled and played with affectionately	-	-	27	100
4	Children receive prompt attention from caregivers	1	3.7	26	96.3
5	Children are warmly welcomed every morning	-	-	27	100
6	Sick babies receive special and adequate attention	1	3.7	26	96.3
7	Children get support when using the potty or toilet	-	-	27	100
8	Children listen to variety of lullabies from their minders	3	11.1	24	88.9

Table 4 shows that the quality of children's experience in the childcare delivery centres high. The detailed analysis is as follows: crawling babies move around freely was rated 100%, children's needs are tenderly responded to was rated 100%, children are cuddled and played with affectionately was rated 100%, children receive prompt in attention from caregivers was rated 96.3%, children are warmly welcomed every morning was rated 100%, sick babies receive special and adequate attention was rated 96.3%, children get support when using the potty or toilet was rated 100% and children listen to variety of lullabies from their minders was rated 88.9%.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study show that childcare providers in Ilorin South LGA of Kwara State adequately provide enabling and safe environments for children in their care. Majority of the centre covered in this study had attractive, clean physical environment (both indoors and outdoors), quiet, well ventilated and bright rooms for children. In addition, security personnel were put in place to ensure that children are protected from intruders. The implication of this is that children in a safe and enabling environment are likely to experience healthy psychological development which is in line with the assertion of Lee and Burkam (2002). In addition, children acquire the basic skills for life and learn best when the physical environment is accessible, safe, hygienic, reasonably comfortable for them to explore. This, however, supports the report of UNICEF (2009) on the role of physical environment of children's learning and development.

The outcome also revealed that the quality of facilities available at the childcare delivery centres of the researched area is high. In other words, most of the centres had spacious rooms for children's free movement, adequate water and power supply, child-sized furniture, toys and gadgets that facilitate proper delivery of care to children and their families. Earthman (2002); Oduolowu and Leigh (2015) supported this finding that adequate supply of appropriate facilities provides opportunity for children to explore and develop skills and competencies across all areas of development. Also, Sussman and Gillman (2016) added that adequate supply of facilities supports rapid growth of child care programmes, encourage enrollment and parents' involvement as well as promote a positive workplace in an industry challenged to retain experienced caregivers.

It was further revealed in the study that caregivers exhibited cordial relationship with children and their families. Usually, children manifest stable emotional expression when they experience warm reception and love from adults. Thus, they learn to trust individuals who give them attention and meet their needs adequately. Pena (2000); Epstein (2001); and Santrock (2007) however supported this notion of partnering with families so that the child's needs and requirements for maximal development will be attained. Jalongo and Isenberg (2012) also affirmed children feel good about themselves when they can trust and form attachment with those who consistently express love for them by meeting their needs both physically and emotionally. This early attachment to the caregivers has an enduring effect on later social and emotional development and behaviour.

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Findings also revealed that the quality of children's experience in the childcare delivery centres is high. This is in line with some established research outcomes by Policy Exchange (2013); UNESCO (2007); UNESCO (2014) which shows that the quality of care, close reassurance and loving relationships children experience play an important role in their development. When children are kept in child care centres, caregivers assume the responsibility of their primary parents, hence, they become substitute parents while under their care. For children to thrive without their parents, they need reassurance. The acts of reassurance thus help them to get comfortable, feel loved and valued by their substitute parents and the outcome becomes visible in their physical, social, emotional, language and mental development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is an established fact that the need for more functional childcare centres is on high demand and will continue to be due to the increase in labour force participation of mothers. For the benefit of children and their families, appropriate quality standards for childcare delivery services must be upheld. Although, different kinds of childcare centres have been established but not all of them can be said to adequately meet the needs of the children and their families. Most of the centres within the scope of this study have appropriate environment, adequate facilities, caregivers exhibited cordial relationship with children and their families and the quality of children's experience in the care was good. This does not rule out the fact that there are many substandard childcare centres out there. If this menace is not quickly looked into by the government and relevant agencies working with/and for children's wellbeing, the success of the future is obviously not guaranteed since it has been established through research that the first six years of a child's life is critical to the later years' success.

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