

Investigating Young Children's Informal Opportunity for Learning Values

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Abstract: The study examines informal opportunities for Nigerian children to imbibe values education at some selected early child care centres in Ibadan Nigeria. The study hinged on the premise that early childhood is a critical period for inculcating values and the fact that values can be taught and learned and the need to enable Nigerian children to imbibe desirable and acceptable values to become healthy, productive and responsible to themselves and members of the society. Many will agree that education fails if its outcome is an individual, who is intelligent, skilled and knowledgeable but unable to live, work and relate positively with others. Fifteen, 4 year old and 25, 5 year old children from 2 child care centres were exposed to a practical values-based child friendly environment and informal opportunities during the school hours to developing the selected values namely respect for others, kindness, fairness, honesty and fair play during both class activities and in informal conversations. Anecdotal records of the behaviours and conversations of the children were kept and analysed after 6 months of the exposure. The observed children showed evidence of thoughtfulness, consideration for others and sense of responsibility. Recommendations are made that values laden activities should be included in pre-school programmes to start early to enhance values education. Also, caregivers should be trained to use informal strategies and integrate values-laden activities into school practices.

Key words: Young children, informal opportunity, learning values, skilled, society, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the demand for early childhood education has increased in Nigeria as in many other parts of the world. The reasons for this are not far-fetched. The period of early childhood from birth to age eight is seen as foundation of lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2000). It is also important because learning is not only life-long but it is life-wide and life-deep. Drake (2002) opines that learning must address the whole person and give individuals a breadth and depth of personality and personal skills in their preparation for life. From birth, children learn how to learn. They learn language and how to use it, they learn to think, learn to interact with others and learn to be creative and adventurous. However, a variety of complex economic and social issues such as changes due to industrialization for instance, the severe austere condition in Nigeria has forced many women with young children in the urban and rural areas to be increasingly involved in income generating activities in both formal and informal settings. Consequently one of the women's essential domestic roles of child care seems to be diminishing both qualitatively and quantitatively. Moreover, factors such as afflictions, injustice, violence ill-health, illiteracy, ignorance and poverty are having negative effects on children's development and learning and creating values problems for the youths especially.

The values problems encountered by the youth are enormous. Children exposure to foreign cultures and values alternatives from which they choose through mass media have further complicated their values problems. Moral decadence and social disorder are evident among them. Based on these values degradation and social disorder of the Nigerian youths, the deliberate teaching and learning of values and the desire to inculcate the right type of societal values in them have been one of the preoccupations of all stakeholders in Nigeria. The struggle for values orientation and re-orientation as a means of promoting human values through educational system has long been initiated (Akinlaye *et al.*, 1999).

Although values education has not been introduced as a separate subject in Nigerian schools, however high priority has been given to the teaching and learning of values in schools since it has been factored into the country's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004). Also some school subjects such as social habits, religious studies among others are recommended as subjects to be taught. Accordingly, the education of children at this level is recognized as one of the environmental influences that can gradually interact with the developing abilities and dispositions of young children to form all aspects of their development (Oduolowu, 2000). It is believed therefore that it is during this period that the foundation

is laid for the development of character and acceptable behaviours are cultivated and established (Hamburge, 1996). Drake (2002) observes that education will not be effective without a foundation of values such as respect for the self, each other, our environment, responsibility, tolerance, integrity, solidarity, justice, love, honesty etc.

The state of values in the nigerian society: The current generation of Nigerian young people is increasingly affected by violence-ethnic and religious wars, militant group attacks, poverty, ill-health, injustice, illiteracy, ignorance to mention a few. Social problems such as lack of respect for each other and the society, advance fee fraud (419), corrupt practices, such as desire for quick money, ritual murder for money making, drug abuse, child abuse and trafficking, armed robbery, etc. are prevalent in the Nigerian society (Akinlaye *et al.*, 1999). One of the reasons for the noticeable changes in many Nigerian values are the demise of highly esteemed traditional system of child rearing practices to inculcate acceptable norms and mores (Bolarin, 2005). Therefore, the habits of life such as always telling and seeking the truth, compassion and kindness towards others, hard work and integrity among others are unfortunately missing in the Nigerian society of today.

Consequently, many people today have difficulty respecting self, each other, our environment, our culture etc. Many lack the skills of responsibility in how they exercise their abilities and many lack tolerance skills, they find it difficult to work with others. A great majority finds it difficult to take qualitative decisions and at the same time, pressures of the modern day demands are too great on ill-equipped individuals to face challenges of day to day living. Many people therefore find it difficult to get their values right while some cannot find life patterns for themselves that are purposeful and satisfying.

This unfortunate situation has caused a great deal of anxiety among thoughtful persons such as educationists, parents, conscientious leaders, government etc. They are concerned that our rapid progress in knowledge and materials has not been matched by corresponding advances in human character and virtue. This is because values are disintegrated on all fronts both public and personal life. It is therefore recognized that the survival of the Nigerian society hinges on a wide-spread renewal of commitment to noble ideas which are embedded in values education. It is therefore imperative that children should be targeted very early in life to ensure they acquire the appropriate values through education particularly values education.

Accordingly, pre-school education of the Nigerian children is as important as the entire education itself

(Lassa, 1995). It is believed that whatever happens to the child before enrolling in the formal school system determine to a great extent the quality of the inputs into the overall development of the child. In other words, there is life and educational opportunity before the start of primary school and the best enhances for success are those which start from early childhood (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1990). The goals of this level of education are geared towards ensuring that children are not only provided with custodial care but character development and also acquire certain habits of life such as always telling the truth, striving for excellence in all things, self-analysis, appreciation of beauty, respect and reverence for all forms of life, compassion and kindness towards others and so on.

The early childhood education curriculum in Nigeria is therefore designed to provide not only custodial care, security and preparing children for formal schooling but it also includes activities that will help children to think and imbibe different values such as honesty, respect for others tolerance, cooperation etc. Therefore, the curriculum includes subjects such as social habits made up of citizenship education, social studies, religious studies, moral instructions and environmental education. These are value-laden subjects which are designed to help the children to imbibe desirable values. Others include communication activities, artistic activities (painting, drawing, moulding), songs and dance to inspire children to express themselves while experiencing the value of focus. These activities stimulate awareness of personal and social responsibility. Unfortunately, the affective domain aspect of these activities wherein the values traits could be imbibed from these is neglected in the school where children spend most of their time and only the cognitive aspect is emphasized. The proprietors of the schools explained that their patronisers are more interested in the cognitive achievements of their wards rather than the affective which is more related to the values education. This is a dangerous trend because education for appropriate development is not complete without a strong base of values education. Drake (2006) says that we need values to ensure that today belongs to everyone and to make the good things in life last longer. Many will agree that education fails if its outcome is an individual who is intelligent, skilled and knowledgeable but unable to live, work and relate positively with others.

The place of values education: It has been recognized that the future of the Nigerian society does not lie alone with the politicians but with the values with which we can inspire today's children who will be adults of tomorrow.

Valuing is now recognized as the process which begins at birth and continues through all stages of development. As Akinpelu (1981) observed, the question of values crop up everywhere in the classroom, in the school and in the society. He opines that values refer to those objects which we cherish, appreciate, want, desire or need. According to Hill (1989), values are ideas we believe in and rate highly enough to live by them. Values refer to criteria for determining levels of goodness, worth or beauty. In short, values are affectively-laden thoughts about objects, ideas, attitude, etc that guide our behaviour (Rokeach, 1973). The act of valuing is an expression of feeling or the acquisition of and adherence to a set of principles.

Values Education is an explicit attempt to teach values and on valuing. Hills (1989) analysed values education in four possible ways:

- **Values inculcation:** This means that teachers mould the learners to the kinds of people the society wants them to be as though they had no say in the matter.
- **Values justification:** This involves individuals striving to identify good and relevant reasons for holding the beliefs they cherish.
- **Values negotiation:** This is when individuals may achieve clarity and defensibility in the development of their personal value system.
- **Values clarification:** This involves making clear to oneself what values are and which values one does, hold and live by.

Each of the above ways has its merits and relevance but there is need for adjustment to the social habits of one's environment and the level of development of the targeted individuals involved. This is the main reason why the informal opportunities will be employed in inculcating values education to the Nigerian pre-school child in this context.

Justification and purpose: The growing rate at which values are fast changing in our society and the extent at which the youths of today are stepping into moral decadence and social disorder in Nigeria and the world over have remained a perennial source of concern to all stakeholders in the education of the child. We are in a world where negative role models, the glorification of violence and materialism abound. Older children and youths rarely acquire positive values simply by being told to do so. However, children can gain greater benefit when guided through an exploration of values and their implications through appropriate strategy which is child-centred, practical and real to the nature of children.

This study therefore focuses on using informal opportunities to inculcate values education to pre-school children. This is because, this has the potentials to enable the children to live to the fullest by enabling them to appreciate the basic human values as essential ingredients to the development of character and they will acquire necessary skills they need, moral education, sense of responsibility for the consequences of their actions, self-discipline and confidence which will promote the fulfillment of their potentials.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample: The sample comprised of 40 children between 4 years and 6 months (15) and 5 years and 6 months (25) as this is the normal age for pre-primary schooling in Nigeria. The children were selected from two Child Care Centres within the University of Ibadan campus where people from different parts of the country take up employment from the University in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The children are mainly Yoruba (17), Igbo (12), Edo (5), Hausa (3), Efik (1) and Ibibio (2). Almost all the children are from two-parent families of middle to high socio-economic backgrounds. They all spoke English as second language.

Instruments: Two instruments were designed by the researcher for use in the study. These include:

- Observation Rating Scale (ORS).
- Intervention Package (IP).

Observation Rating Scale (ORS): An objective rating scale was adapted for the observance of school practices in relation to inculcating values-laden skills and the strategies employed to inculcate the skills during social habits period which was three times a week in the child care centres selected for the study. In the scale, the following indicators were identified for observation:

- Adult model values- demonstrating peaceful, respectful and kind methods of communication with children and adult.
- Interaction with children, promoting the feelings of being loved, valued, respected, understood and safe.
- Children are listened to and positive efforts and qualities are acknowledged.
- Caregivers model tolerance and valuing each and every one by appreciating difference and diversity.
- Rules and limits are clear- there is discipline without anger.

- Mistakes are treated as opportunity to learn (UNESCO, 2000).
- Cooperation with the parents.

Development of the instruments: Prior to the beginning of the study, the researcher spent 6 weeks in the Child care center. Each visit took approximately two and half hours in duration. During this period, children and the school practices were observed. Formal consent had been obtained from parents and the school headmistresses to interact with the children on one-one and in groups. It was during this period that the observation scale was developed which was designed to be used for the assessment of the children after the proposed intervention.

To analyze children's behaviour, inductive processes similar to those described by Diamond and Cooper (2000) and Smith *et al.* (1989) in their investigations of children's perceptions of their teachers' role was adapted to fit into this study. These processes involved the researcher and three other research assistants who independently developed initial coding categories from the data each identified that seemed best represent the children's behaviour based on the values indicators listed above. The researchers then agreed about the categories to use in observing the children.

The categories agreed upon include:

- **Honesty:** Engaging in specific actions that portray this trait such as owing up to wrong doing, telling the truth etc.
- **Kindness:** Showing others what to do, helping others if they have difficulties etc.
- **Fair play:** Telling others to stop doing things they are not suppose to do etc.
- **Respect for others:** Willingly sharing materials, taking turns, courteous and orderly etc.

The researcher then used the scale on similar sample from another child care center in the same town. The instrument yielded this result ($r = 0.75$).

The study was conducted in two phases: The first phase involved observation visits to two randomly selected child care centres to assess the learning environment and the activities that are values-laden and how teachers have been teaching or imparting values especially those that have been identified for this study. The researcher was allowed to interact with the children using this strategy to inculcate the selected key values for 90 min a day and twice a week. Mondays and Tuesdays were chosen for the four and half year old children in one of the two

selected centres and Wednesday and Thursday for five and half year old children in the other centre selected for the same 90 min a day.

The researcher and research assistants who had been tutored in the use of the instruments carried out the intervention which involved the use of informal opportunities to teach values-laden topics in social habits a subject in the curriculum for early childhood education which consists of themes such as honesty, respect for others, responsibility, cooperation, etc. As Sankey (2002) pointed out that values are already inherent in the many school subjects in which social habits is one.

The informal opportunities presented in the intervention package involved the following:-

Processes:

- Rules and limits were set with the children at the beginning of the interaction.
- A practical, safe and values-based child-friendly environment was created where children were encouraged to obey the rules they have created, look after objects and materials, avoid quarrelling, be kind, cheerful, grateful to others etc.
- Children were encouraged, listened to, respected, understood, loved and valued as individuals during story time; They were told stories, folklores portraying honesty, kindness, fair play, respect for others etc.
- Mistakes were treated as an opportunity to learn and honest behaviours were encouraged.

Second stage: Children were allowed time to explore values through activities principally through story telling (communication).

Understanding values by engaging in activities such as tracing, shading, drawing, painting etc, enjoying values through games, dance and songs.

- Listening to what the children say in class activities, discussions and in informal conversations on one-on-one basis.
- Children were encouraged to reflect more deliberately and comprehensively on stories they heard or told.
- Non-judgmental questions were asked to elicit more responses from the children.

These activities were carried on for two terms (26 weeks) with a four week holiday in between the two terms. At the end of second term of the interaction, the children values system was assessed using the Observation Scale in the values categories highlighted in the scale design for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the preliminary visits revealed that the sample classrooms were resource-starved, teaching strategies are highly structured and formal and the environment less child-friendly. There are values-laden subjects such as social habits, social studies, religious studies but only the cognitive aspects of these subjects were emphasized and assessed. Only few portion of the assessment sheet or report card of the children is devoted to affective domain. Children were less expressive and classroom practices were rigid.

As the weeks of intervention progressed, the class attendance showed improvement in the two classes used for the study. The reason for this may have been as a result of the fun filled classroom activities, freedom of expression and action packed learning tasks which became more and more exciting. Children were found to be more expressive.

Children were happier in relating with one another and other adults of the classroom environment and aggressive behaviour became less. They had more instructional materials to use. Where a particular toy could not go round, they took turns in playing with such. They also showed evidence of willingly sharing their personal toys with others.

Children were also observed to be more caring: for themselves, their belongings, class properties and the learning environment. Children were seen arranging their belongings in orderly manner. They took pleasure in arranging the books at the reading corner and items at the shopping corner in the classroom. They became more conscious of setting their chairs and tables in proper positions, to mention a few. They were accountable for their own actions. They also resolved differences in constructive and non-violent and peaceful ways. This was a clear evidence of being responsible.

There were evidences of increase in respect of the care givers and the other children. They treated each other with consideration and regard, they also respected other person's point of view. They showed themselves to be courteous and orderly in their behaviour. There were less cases of violence. There abound in the classrooms love, peace and happiness. There was also regular communication and work with peers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The major challenge found to militate against the use of this informal strategy in enhancing values education at the early childhood level is the ill-equipped caregivers

that man early child care centres in Nigeria. Many of the teachers are ignorant of values education and are not knowledgeable about how to enhance learning values in the classroom setting through the various classroom tasks. For this reason, there is the need to train and/or re-train care givers to use the informal strategies and also to be able to create a values-based child-friendly environment.

Integrating values education into school policies and practices cannot be over emphasized. Everyday activities in the school in general and the classrooms practices in particular should be values-laden. Emphasis should also be on positive emotion and affective behaviours.

CONCLUSION

The argument in this study is premised on the fact that values education can be imparted effectively if the appropriate strategies are employed, if the learning environment is structured to be child-friendly and values oriented. Although informal activities abound in the school setting, the opportunities are not usually annexed. It is therefore imperative that caregivers at this level of education should create a values-based child-friendly learning environment and take good cognizance of the inherent values in the elements of process of learning values informally to enhance values education to nurture total normal development of the children at early childhood.

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