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Qualitative Study of the Proximal and Distal Features of Day Care Quality and Children's Development

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Abstract:

The aim of the study was to uncover qualitative study of the proximal and distal features of day care quality and children's development. The study involved focus on 40 teachers who are used to. Results from the qualitative data analyses revealed that there are some predominant features of day care quality in early childhood education (ECE) in Lagos state and also the efficacy of proximal and distal quality in predicting children's development in early childhood education (ECE) is state was also established. It was concluded that caregiver child interaction variables of divergent/elaborative interactions, praise/nuturance/redirection, clear limits, and total limits, referred to caregiver's interactions with all children in the class.

Keywords: Proximal and distal features, day care quality, children's development

1. Introduction

The future of Nigeria, like any other countries in the world, depends largely on the quality of education for her children. Consequently, the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) was emphatic about the necessity of providing education for all children, youth and adults that is responsive to their needs and relevant to their lives. The foundation of formal education for most children is usually the early childhood care or preschool education. Early childhood care and education is concerned with the care, development and education of children aged 0-6 years or just before the age of formal schooling. This early stage is perceived as the period of immense opportunity for growth and development. It is the most delightful yet risky period in the development of the child as experience gained at this stage may make or mar the child permanently. Studies have shown that early childhood care and education/intervention programs significantly enhance children's prospects for academic success by reducing the probability of referral to special education, grade retention, and leaving school prior to graduation, especially for children at risk for academic underachievement (Smith, 2014; Bowman, Miller & Almon, 2012; Donovan & Burns, 2001; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000; Barnett, 1995). This implies that the quality of early childhood care influences the future academic performance of a child.

Quality, within the context of this study is expressed in term of needs based criteria. Education, in this sense is said to be of good quality if it addresses the needs and expectations of the people. According to the National Policy on Education NPE (2004:3), the primary objective of education 'is to train the minds of the scholars... (In) the acquisition of appropriate skills, the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competences; and in laying of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking as an equipment for the individual to live and contribute in the development of the larger society and oneself.' This signifies that the essence of classroom learning is to make the learner useful in solving problems in the society. It is important to note that formal education commences from early childhood education since it is the foundation for which other levels of education are built upon. In other words, early childhood care or preschool education is a term used to describe any form of regular, non-maternal care, including informal arrangements with relatives, care by nanny in the child's home, care with a small group of unrelated children in the child care provider's home, and a center-based care, including day care centers, preschool, and early childhood program (Connor & Morrison, 2014).

Therefore, by recognizing the importance of early learning experiences for young children's school readiness and lifelong success, it becomes essential to assure that early child care, irrespective of whether private or publicly owned, has greater access to high-quality services. This is essentially important because there is considerable evidence that children receiving high quality child care demonstrate better developmental outcomes than children in low quality care (Heyburn et al., 1995; Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Burkina, Roberts, Nabors, & Bryant, 1996; NICHD, 1999; Boesky et al., 2007; Howe's et al., 2008; Mash burn et AL, 2008).

Historically, the concept of quality has been used in different contexts, including the context of education. In other words, given the widespread use of the quality concept in various social contexts, it is in a way hardly surprising that it is eventually been introduced in educational sector as well. Quality, in the context of education, emphasizes on the acceptability and adaptability of education to meet the needs of the individual learners, employers of labors as well as the nation at large. According to La Paros, Thomason, Lower and Cassidy (2012), the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that learning and teaching promote must reflect and respond to the needs and expectations of individuals, countries, the global population and the world of work today. Not only teaching basic skills like reading and math, but encouraging critical thinking and fostering the desire and capacity for lifelong learning that adapts and shifts in local, national and global dynamics. Therefore, good quality education, provided by trained and supported teachers, is the right of all children, youth and adults alike.

Assessing quality, especially in preschool program is usually not an easy task as quality continues to be an amorphous term with varying definitions within Early Childhood Education (Hammer&Piñata, 2007). Besides, different scholars have diverse views of the concept of quality. Some define quality based on the physical resources available for preschool programs (La Paros, Thomason, Lower & Cassidy, 2012). In this sense, emphasis is laid on physical plant, teacher credentials, and child—staff ratios (Shonkoff&Measles, 2000). Others tied the definition of quality to child success. However, child success also has complex meaning. For example, success has been variously defined as children's school completion, delinquency, referral to special education, linguistic skills, cognitive ability, academic performance, and social development, including infant responsiveness, peer relations, and behaviour in the classroom (Burchinal, Campbell, Bryant, Wasik, & Ramey, 1997; La Paros, Thomason, Lower & Cassidy, 2012).

Thus, in order to design high-quality preschool programs, service-providers and policy-makers need a clear sense of what the program is to accomplish. This implies that quality could be defined on the basis of the objectives of the early childhood education. In other words, quality can be operationalized through the identification of specific service objectives. Therefore, the process of defining service objectives, of including the rights and expectations of interest groups is important in its own right. Such a process allows the examination of individual services and more broadly, community and societal provision with the aim of ensuring that services are provided for all children regardless of race, gender, disability, parental income or geographical location.

Dunn (1993) identified two dimensions of quality in preschool program: process and structure. The process quality encompasses the interactions, activities, materials, learning opportunities, and health and safety routines of the day care program. The second dimension, structural quality, includes the size of each group of children, the adult-child ratio, and the education and training of the teachers and staff.

However, the foundation of this study is drawn from Harms and Clifford (1990) dimensions of the quality of day care or preschool program. According to Harms and Clifford (1980), quality of preschool program can be based on their proximity to children's actual experiences. In this sense, distal quality assessments describe experiences potentially available to children, but do not describe actual experiences. Distal quality assessments include structural variables, such as ratio, group size, caregiver characteristics, and global quality assessments such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms & Clifford, 1980). Proximal quality assessments describe the actual events experienced by children in day care settings. Proximal quality was defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC; Bredekamp, 1987) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices and included caregiver goals, strategies, and guidance. In other words, existing work on child care quality in family child care homes has delineated two possible sets of influences: first, provider characteristics, or proximal influences on family child care, such as the amount of training and level of education; and second, state policy variables, or distal influences on family child care, such as regulation and subsidy density.

The present study therefore is set to explore qualitatively the proximal and distal features of day care quality and children's development in Lagos State with the goal of providing adequate information needed to design child care/preschool program to make it more useful to the children in particular, and to the national at large. The present study is exceptionally important because in order to design preschool program, planners need accurate information about the programmatic factors that lead to best practices and best outcomes in early education. Hence the present study.

1.1. Statement of Problem

The continual falling standard of Nigerian education is a major concern to every Nigerian citizen given that quality education is the backbone for national and economic development and growth of every nation. According to a recent World Bank study, 'employers complain that the quality of university graduates (and secondary school graduates), especially their communication skills, has fallen continually for two decades' (Bollag, Feb 1, 2002, A41). Most products of Nigeria's institutions are mere certificate carriers and are not qualified to be addressed as university or polytechnic graduates. This poor academic achievement of most tertiary institutions' graduates could be trace to the poor standard of early childhood care. This is true because several studies have proven that early childhood care and education/intervention programs have significant effect on children's prospects for academic success (Smith, 2014; Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000; Barnett, 1995). This implies that the quality of early childhood care influences the future academic performance of a child. Unfortunately, not all programs and practices in Early Childhood Education are equally effective in promoting the learning and development of young children. The overall effectiveness of an early childhood program and practices is dependent upon several factors such as quality staff; suitable environment, appropriate grouping practices, consistent schedules, parental involvement and time factors, etc. Thus, the problem of the present study is to qualitatively investigate the proximal and distal features of day care quality and

children's development in Lagos State with the goal of providing adequate information needed to design child care/preschool program in order to make it more useful to the children in particular, and to the national at large.

1.2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the proximal and distal features of day care quality and children's development in Lagos State. This study specifically seeks to:

- To determine the predominant features of day care quality in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State
- To examine the efficacy of proximal and distal quality in predicting children's development in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State

1.3. Research Questions

- What are the predominant features of day care quality in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State?
- What is the efficacy of proximal and distal quality in predicting children's development in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State?

1.4. Research Methods

The present study is a qualitative study. The present study design is exceptionally important to the present study because the findings of this study, like every typical qualitative findings will be in the form of themes, categories, concepts or tentative hypotheses or theories for the polios of knowledge enhancement. The study population will constitute all early child care centers and pre-primary school in Lagos state, Nigeria. The study will adopt a multi stage sampling technique to investigate qualitatively the proximal and distal features of day care quality and children's development in Lagos State with the goal of providing adequate information needed to design child care/preschool program to make it more useful to the children in particular, and to the national at large. Multistage sampling refers to sampling carried out in stages. The researcher will adopt a purpose sampling to select twenty day care centers/preprimary school within Surulere and Victoria Island areas in Lagos state. The aim is to ensure that both schools located in the mainland and the island is represented in the study. From these choice areas, ten schools will be selected from each of the mainland and island. For the ten schools, five will be from private schools while the other five will be from public schools. The researcher will then purposively select two teachers from each of the schools sampled out for the study. This will give us a total sample size of forty (40) respondents.

Focus group discussion will be the primary instrument for data collection. Focus group discussion is a kind of research tools peculiar for qualitative study where the subjects or respondents are gathered in a place as a group to express their opinion about their views, perceptions, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, etc. towards a concept, a phenomenon, an idea or activities, etc., In the case of this study of the present study, focus group discussion will be adopted by the researcher to elicit responses from the choice respondents regarding the predominant features of day care quality in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State; the efficacy of proximal and distal quality in predicting children's development in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State; the elements of early childhood education which are associated with long-term positive effects on children's academic success; the extent to which day care quality in ECE Lagos state meets the NAEYC's standard for preschool program; and identify the best practices for fostering quality education in ECE Lagos state. The data recorded will be transcribed and analyze qualitatively using t-test. From the result, discussion will be made.

2. Results

2.1. Research Question One

What are the predominant features of day care quality in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State?

| Variable Response | N | Mean | SD | Df | X ² - cal | T-Tab | Decision |
|----------------------|----|-------|-------|----|----------------------|-------|----------|
| Predominant features | 12 | 2.452 | 1.025 | 38 | 30.612 | 1.96 | Rejected |
| Day care quality | 28 | 2.965 | 0.999 | | | | |

Table 1: The Table on the Predominant Features of Day Care Quality in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Lagos State

Table 1 above shows a calculated t- value for 30.612, testing at an alpha level of 0.05, and the table value 1.96. The calculated t-value 30.612 was greater than the table t-value 1.96.

2.2. Research Question Two

What is the efficacy of proximal and distal quality in predicting children's development in early childhood education (ECE) Lagos State?

| Variable Response | Sex | N | Mean | SD | Df | X ² - Cal | T-tab | Decision |
|---|--------|----|-------|-------|----|----------------------|-------|----------|
| Efficacy of proximal and distal quality | Female | 13 | 2.732 | 0.423 | 38 | 2.973 | 1.96 | Rejected |
| | Male | 27 | 2.361 | 0.527 | | | | |

Table 2: The Table Shows the Efficacy of Proximal and Distal Quality in Predicting Children's Development in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Lagos State

The table above shows a calculated t- value for 2.973, testing at an alpha level of 0.05, and the table value 1.96. The calculated t-value 2.973 was greater than the table t-value 1.96.

3. Discussion of Findings

The results obtained from the study have been revealing even though some are predictable, it was evident in the study that there are some predominant features of day care quality in early childhood education (ECE) in Lagos state and also the efficacy of proximal and distal quality in predicting children's development in early childhood education (ECE) is state was also established. In support of the above findings, Kontos, (1991); Kontos& Dunn, (1989), day care factors did a better job of predicting children's social development than cognitive development. Whereas the results presented here support the notion of greater vulnerability of social development to day care influences, family factors were also influential in determining children's social development. The unique pattern of predictors revealed for each of the outcome variables supports Kontos's (1991) ideas regarding the differential vulnerability of each developmental domain to both family and day care influences.

4. Conclusion

It was concluded that even though the proximal quality measures studied here represented actual classroom events, only the play space and variety variables represented situations we can be sure the target children experienced. The caregiver child interaction variables of divergent/elaborative interactions, praise/ nurturance/redirection, clear limits, and total limits, referred to caregiver's interactions with all children in the class. Had these interactions been observed directly with the target children and concurrently with the assessments of children's play, additional information on the salience of these quality components to children's development might have been obtained. The disappointing performance of proximal quality variables in predicting children's development is open to two interpretations. One is that the proximal quality variables pulled from the NAEYC guidelines are not particularly important components of children's experiences in day care and are not as proximal to children's development as assumed. A second interpretation is that the child outcome measures used here were not sufficiently sensitive to illuminate the influence of these variables on children's development.

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