

ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ENUGU STATE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to evaluate the implementation of quality assurance in early childhood education in public schools in Enugu State. The study was guided by two research questions and two null hypotheses, which were tested at a significance level of 0.05. A descriptive survey research design was used, and the population consisted of 1,202 head teachers, including 804 females and 398 males, in Enugu State. The sample for the study comprised 360 respondents, with 119 males and 241 females selected using stratified, proportionate simple random sampling. Data was collected using a structured 13-item questionnaire called the "Early Childhood Education Programme for Quality Assurance Questionnaire (ECEPQAQ)", which was face validated by three research experts. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach Alpha statistic, resulting in a reliability index of 0.81 for both clusters A and B, indicating good reliability for data collection. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher and two research assistants, and a total of 292 completed questionnaires were retrieved out of the 360 administered. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested using t-test statistics at a significance level of 0.05. The study found that compliance with standard learning environments and curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education in public primary schools in Enugu State was significantly high. Based on these findings, recommendations were made, including the need for the government to fence the school premises of early childhood education centers to ensure a secure environment, as well as the provision of separate toilet facilities for boys and girls by non-governmental organizations, philanthropists, and other well-meaning individuals.

Keywords: Assessment, Quality Assurance, Implementation, Early Childhood Education.

Introduction

Education is viewed as a means to promote socioeconomic and technological progress and advancement in any country. It is considered the most essential tool for cultivating well-rounded individuals with the necessary skills, knowledge, attitude, and values to lead fulfilling lives (Arogundade and Belo, 2019). Education is often referred to as the foundation of a society, serving as an exceptional instrument for developing intellectual capabilities, technical expertise, character, and effective citizenship, leading to self-reliance and national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2013). Aguba (2009) defines education as an essential tool for individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Education has facilitated the rapid advancement of science and technology, contributing to the progress of

numerous nations (Agwu, 2016). Additionally, Ocho and Nwangwu (2011) assert that a nation's growth and development hinge on the quality of its educational system.

In Nigeria, education is divided into four levels: Early Childhood Education (ECE), primary education, secondary education, and tertiary education. However, this study specifically focuses on Early Childhood Education. Early childhood education (ECE) encompasses various educational activities that cater to children between the ages of zero and five years (0-5 years). It is a period characterized by rapid growth and development, often referred to as the foundational stage of life, as it holds the key to a child's overall maximum development (Obiweluzo, 2012). Maduwesi, as cited in Nwogbo (2012), defines early childhood education as the education provided to children who have not yet reached the age to begin primary school. The education received during this period plays a vital role in promoting the appropriate development of children. Early childhood education refers to the educational experiences provided to children before they enter primary school (FRN, 2013). It encompasses various educational settings, including daycare centers, nurseries, and kindergartens.

In most societies, it is customary to provide early childhood education programs for children below the official school age (usually 6 years old). The primary purpose of these programs is to prepare children for their formal education in primary schools (Obidike, 2012). Despite the guidelines provided by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) regarding the operation of early childhood education programs in Nigeria and other developing countries, the goals of such education have not been fully achieved. In order for any educational program, including early childhood education, to successfully meet its objectives, certain factors need to be adequately addressed. These factors include the quality of teachers, provision of infrastructure, curriculum implementation, and others. Currently, there is uncertainty regarding the extent to which these requirements are being fulfilled. Early childhood education is a crucial aspect of a child's formal education and plays a significant role in the development of various mental functions, such as language, motor skills, psychosocial abilities, cognitive abilities, and learning (Bowman, Donovan, and Burns, 2011). To accomplish these objectives, it is essential to ensure quality.

Quality assurance refers to the activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that a product or service meets the required standards of quality (Ayeni, 2011). It involves establishing attainable standards for a process, organizing work to achieve objectives, documenting necessary procedures, communicating them to relevant parties, and monitoring to assess the attainment of standards (Ayeni, 2011). Quality assurance serves as a means to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of teaching and learning in primary schools, aiming to ensure the delivery of high-quality education. Mbaji, Ebirim, and Akwali (2012) state that quality assurance involves setting standards for various processes and activities that lead to the achievement of quality outcomes. It entails systematically reviewing educational programs and processes to maintain and enhance their quality, equity, and efficiency (Nwogbo, 2013). In the context of the school system, quality assurance refers to the ability of educational institutions to meet the expectations of employers in terms of the skills and quality of graduates they produce (Abdulrahman, 2014).

Quality assurance in early childhood education (ECE) encompasses various aspects, including the learning environment and curriculum implementation. The learning environment refers to the physical locations, contexts, and cultures where students engage in the learning process. It encompasses the conditions and influences that learners encounter, leading to complex interactions and behavioral changes. Consequently, a conducive learning environment is crucial for effective teaching and learning (National Teachers' Institute, 2008). This study evaluated the ECE programme with a focus on the learning environment, highlighting the importance of conducting such research.

Another key aspect of quality assurance in ECE is curriculum implementation. The curriculum serves as the fundamental vehicle for education. It encompasses both planned and unplanned experiences that learners undergo during their formal or semi-formal education, with the aim of developing well-rounded individuals capable of making meaningful contributions to society (Ogunyemi in Offor, 2013). The curriculum extends beyond the syllabus of individual subjects, incorporating various teaching and learning strategies (Adeyinka, 2010). It represents the integrated set of courses and planned activities that students engage in under the guidance of the school and the instruction of teachers (Tracy in Nwogbo, 2013). Curriculum implementation involves translating the curriculum document into practical application within the classroom by teachers (Obilo and Sangoleye, 2015), with the collaborative efforts of students, teachers, and other stakeholders (Mkpa in Ali and Ajibuola, 2015). This study aims to assess the ECE program in terms of curriculum implementation, underscoring the significance of such an investigation.

This study examines the importance of teachers' quality as a crucial factor for ensuring the quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs. In order for education to fulfill its role effectively, teachers need to be well-versed in modern teaching methods, particularly in utilizing instructional materials effectively (Ozioko, 2008). Teachers play a central role in the development of a nation, as stated by Ugbechie in Nwogbo (2013). They are instrumental in raising educational standards, fostering learning, promoting peace, and eliminating discrimination. This study focuses on evaluating the ECE program with regards to the quality of teachers, thus highlighting the necessity of this research. It aims to determine cost-effectiveness and assess whether the teaching program is effective in helping children achieve desired learning outcomes under the guidance of a head teacher.

A head teacher, who is responsible for overseeing a school, serves as an internal supervisor guiding teachers towards effective teaching and learning in each classroom (Fisher in Nwogbo, 2012). The gender of the head teacher may influence their authority and responsibilities, as noted by Nwaham in Chime (2015). Head teachers are involved in developing and implementing school development plans, maintaining both statutory and non-statutory records, as well as leading teaching and learning in schools. Therefore, the roles of head teachers are crucial in assessing the ECE program. However, it remains unclear whether gender influences the performance of head teachers, and this study aims to investigate that aspect.

As explained by Ibiam (2011), the education of young children should be well-structured and pursued with determination through comprehensive programs. Implementing ECE programs for quality assurance in public schools can contribute to achieving educational goals.

However, there seem to be factors hindering successful ECE program implementation in public schools. Governments, teachers, communities, society, parents, guardians, and students all potentially contribute to these challenges. Therefore, this study focused on evaluating the quality assurance in the implementation of early childhood education in Enugu State public schools.

Statement of the Problem

The early childhood education program in Enugu State, Nigeria, was designed with the intention of bringing positive changes to the educational system by providing quality, functional, and free education. However, this vision has faced several challenges that have hindered its effectiveness. These obstacles include insufficient classroom space, inadequate implementation of the curriculum, a lack of laboratories, and deteriorating infrastructure, among others. Various stakeholders, including the government, parents, and society as a whole, have raised concerns about internal inefficiencies among primary school teachers, which are believed to contribute to declining academic and moral standards among students. Despite the well-defined goals and objectives of early childhood education outlined in the National Policy on Education, the actualization of these goals has not been successful. Moreover, the number of teachers in pre-primary schools is insufficient, and many of them lack the necessary qualifications and have not received specialized early childhood education training programs. The current disparity between the stated goals and the implementation of early childhood education suggests the presence of obstacles within the program. In order to achieve the goals of the early childhood education program, it is crucial to identify and address the barriers that impede its effective implementation. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate the early childhood education program in Enugu State public schools, with a focus on ensuring quality assurance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess quality assurance in implementation of early childhood education in Enugu State public schools. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. identify the extent of compliance to standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State;
2. ascertain the extent of compliance to standard in curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the extent of compliance to standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State?
2. What is the extent of compliance to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at .05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female head teachers on the extent of compliance to standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female head teachers on the extent of compliance to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State.

Research Method

In the course of conducting this study, the researcher utilized a descriptive survey research design. According to Uzoagulu (2011) and Nworgu (2015), this design involves studying a group of individuals or items by collecting and analyzing data from a small subset of individuals who are considered representative of the entire population. The population for this study consisted of 1,202 head teachers, comprising 804 females and 398 males, in Enugu State. The sample selected for the study consisted of 360 respondents, with 119 males and 241 females serving as head teachers. The researcher employed a stratified, proportionate simple random sampling technique to obtain the sample of respondents. To collect data, a structured 13-item questionnaire titled "Early Childhood Education Programme for Quality Assurance Questionnaire (ECEPQAQ)" was used. The questionnaire was validated by three research experts, two from the Department of Educational Management and one from the Measurement and Evaluation unit in the Department of Mathematics and Computer Education, all affiliated with the Faculty of Education at Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT). The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach Alpha statistic, which yielded a reliability index of .81 for cluster A, .81 for cluster B, and an overall reliability index of .81, indicating that the instrument was reliable and suitable for data collection.

The researcher, along with two research assistants who were briefed in a one-day meeting, administered the 360 copies of the questionnaire to the respondents. However, out of the 360 copies distributed, the researcher and her assistants retrieved 292 copies (89 from head teachers and 203 from female head teachers), resulting in a return rate of 81.11%. The research questions were addressed using mean and standard deviation, while the hypotheses were tested using the t-test statistic at a significance level of 0.05. The benchmark set for the mean score was as follows: any mean score equal to or greater than 2.50 indicated a "great extent," while any mean score below 2.50 indicated a "low extent." The benchmark of 2.50 was derived by summing up the weighted options ($4+3+2+1=10$) and dividing it by the total number of response options (4), resulting in $10/4=2.50$. For the hypotheses, the decision rule was as follows: the null hypothesis was not rejected when the calculated t-value was less than the critical table value, but rejected when the calculated t-value was greater than or equal to the critical table value.

Data Analysis and Results Presentation

Research Question 1: What is the extent of compliance to standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State?

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Male and Female Head Teachers on the Extent of Compliance to Standard Learning Environment for Quality Assurance in Early Childhood Education Programme in Public Primary Schools in Enugu State

ITEMS		Male = 89			Female = 203		
S/N	The following ECE standard learning environment is complied to:	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec.	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec.
1.	there are adequate seats for pupils in the centre.	2.64	.90	GE	2.61	.95	GE
2.	ECE centres have fence around the school vicinity.	2.42	.91	LE	2.40	.95	LE
3.	there is provision of field for sports.	2.51	.89	GE	2.53	.95	GE
4.	ECE centres are in secured environment.	2.59	.86	GE	2.61	.91	GE
5.	ECE centres are far from noisy environment.	2.63	.95	GE	2.69	.96	GE
6.	ECE centres are situated far from markets.	2.55	.83	GE	2.50	.99	GE
Grand Mean/SD		2.50	.92	GE	2.53	.94	GE

Table 1 displays the average ratings given by male and female head teachers regarding their adherence to the standard learning environment for ensuring quality in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State. The ratings for male head teachers ranged from 2.31 to 2.64, while the ratings for female head teachers ranged from 2.38 to 2.68. Additionally, the grand means for male and female head teachers were 2.50 and 2.53, respectively, with standard deviations of 0.92 and 0.94. The similarity in the standard deviations indicates a close relationship among the respondents' responses. Thus, the head teachers' ratings indicate a substantial level of compliance with the standard learning environment for ensuring quality in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State.

Research Question 2: What is the extent of compliance to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State?

Table 2: Mean Ratings of Male and Female Head Teachers on the Extent of Compliance to Curriculum Implementation for Quality Assurance in Early Childhood Education Programme in Public Primary Schools in Enugu State

ITEMS		Male = 89			Female = 203		
S/N	The following ECE curriculum is adhered to:	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec.	$\bar{x}$	SD	Dec.
7.	teachers are encouraged to cover their scheme of work.	2.81	.90	GE	2.76	.93	GE
8.	teachers' are always trained to meet the needs of the curriculum.	2.41	.99	LE	2.43	.95	LE
9.	the schools have adequate instructional materials.	2.56	.95	GE	2.61	.95	GE

10.	teachers' lesson notes are supervised by the head teacher.	2.74	.80	GE	2.71	.91	GE
11.	provision of writing tools in every class.	2.58	.90	GE	2.60	.91	GE
12.	ECE centres adhere to the minimum standard.	2.68	.92	GE	2.55	.90	GE
13.	head teacher supervises play equipment in the classes.	2.64	.93	GE	2.58	.97	GE
Grand Mean/SD		2.60	.91	GE	2.57	.94	GE

Table 2 presents the average ratings given by male and female head teachers regarding their adherence to curriculum implementation for ensuring quality in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State. The ratings for male head teachers ranged from 2.41 to 2.81, while those for female head teachers ranged from 2.39 to 2.76. Moreover, the grand means were calculated as 2.60 for males and 2.57 for females, with standard deviations of .91 and .94 respectively. The similarity in standard deviations indicates a close relationship between the respondents' answers. Consequently, the head teachers expressed that they adhere significantly to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State.

Hypotheses

Ho₁: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female head teachers on the extent of compliance to standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State.

Table 3: Summary of t-test Analysis on the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Head Teachers on the Extent of Compliance to Standard Learning Environment for Quality Assurance in Early Childhood Education Programme

Group	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male	89	2.50	.92	290	.25	±1.96	Do not reject Ho ₁
Female	203	2.53	.94				

Table 3 presents findings indicating that the calculated value of 0.25 is smaller than the Table value of ±1.96 at a significance level of 0.05, with 290 degrees of freedom. This suggests that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, there is no statistically significant distinction between the average ratings given by male and female head teachers regarding compliance with standard learning environments for quality assurance in early childhood education programs in Enugu State's public primary schools.

Ho₂: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female head teachers on the extent of compliance to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Enugu State.

Table 4: Summary of t-test Analysis on the Mean Ratings of Male and Female Head Teachers on the Extent of Compliance to Curriculum Implementation for Quality Assurance in Early Childhood Education Programme

Group	n	$\bar{x}$	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male	89	2.60	.91	290	.25	± 1.96	Do not reject H_0
Female	203	2.57	.94				

Table 4 presents data indicating that the calculated value of 0.25 is smaller than the Table value of ± 1.96 at a significance level of 0.05 with 290 degrees of freedom. This suggests that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, there is no statistically significant distinction between the average ratings of male and female head teachers regarding their adherence to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programs in Enugu State's public primary schools.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings indicated that the level of compliance with the standard learning environment for ensuring quality in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State is substantial. The evidence gathered in the study strongly supports the presence of adequate seating for pupils, provision of sports facilities, secure environments in the early childhood education centers, separation from noisy environments and markets, among other factors. These findings align with Enueme's (2014) assertion that standard learning environments are provided in early childhood education centers, which is crucial for achieving the objectives of early childhood education. Furthermore, the study found no significant difference between male and female head teachers in their ratings of compliance with the standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State, as tested by the hypothesis.

Similarly, the study revealed that the adherence to curriculum implementation for quality assurance in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State is considerable. The evidence gathered in the study strongly supports the encouragement of teachers to cover their scheme of work, the presence of adequate instructional materials in schools, supervision of teachers' lesson notes by the head teacher, provision of writing tools in every class, and adherence to minimum standards in the early childhood education centers, among other factors. These findings are consistent with Ekpo, Madu, and Adigun's (2016) assertion that the government-developed curriculum for pre-primary schools is extensively used for teaching and learning, which greatly contributes to achieving the objectives of early childhood education. Additionally, the study found no significant difference between male and female head teachers in their ratings of compliance with the standard learning environment for quality assurance in early childhood education programs in public primary schools in Enugu State, as tested by the hypothesis.

Conclusion

Based on the study's results, it was concluded that primary schools with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programs predominantly employ qualified teachers rather than unqualified ones. This is supported by the fact that the majority of teachers hold degrees such as NCE and B.Sc. The provision of instructional materials for ECCE centers is sufficient, and there is also a suitable curriculum in place for running the ECCE program.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. The government should fence around the school vicinity of the ECE centres in order to have a secured environment.
2. Separate toilet facilities for boys and girls should be provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), philanthropists and well meaning individuals.

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