

EFFECTS OF ACTIVITY-BASED TRAINING WORKSHOPS ON PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' AWARENESS, KNOWLEDGE AND INTENTION TO USE INTEGRATED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM

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Abstract

Experience in the past workshops in Nigeria shows that the majority of the resource persons adopted teacher-centred methods to deliver their papers and this has not been found effective most especially when the workshop is about skills acquisition and the number of participants is large. This informed the adoption of activity-based strategy to equip the participants of the National workshops organised by Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) for Early Childhood Educators on the use of Integrated Early Childhood Development Curriculum (IECDC). The workshops were organised thrice so as to cover the whole nation at Lagos, Imo and Edo States. The learning of the participants was measured in terms of awareness, knowledge and intention to use the IECDC. The post training behaviour of the participants revealed that huge differences were recorded in the awareness, Knowledge and intention to use IECDC compare to their pre training behaviour. It was recommended that strategies that will actively involve the participants should be adopted by the resource persons in workshops that meant to impact skills acquisition.

Keywords: Workshop, Skill Acquisition, Curriculum implementation, Activity-based strategy, Curriculum awareness, Knowledge of curriculum, Intention to use, Early Childhood Educators, workshop resource persons

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Introduction

The place of curriculum in the formal education system is so paramount that without it, there will be nothing called formal education. In fact, one of the factors sustaining western education as a system is curriculum. The level of success that an educational system may attain, what is required to attain such level of success, how such requirement may be presented, and what barometer to be used in determining whether or not that level of success has been attained are all essential components of a good curriculum. Dushi (2012) describes curriculum as the warp and woof of the whole educational process. In this regard, it is clear that any education programme can be assessed based on the curriculum used. A good curriculum package, if well and religiously implemented, has a greater chance of achieving the educational goals.

Some of the benefits of a curriculum to educational system include the provision of the philosophy upon which the education system is based; the guiding of the educational process and activities; and the provision of a yardstick with which the development of the recipients could be measured. Curriculum also reflects the trends in the rise or otherwise of the standard of the educational system (Dushi, 2012). If properly followed, there should be a smooth process to the achievement of the stated objectives.

There are additional benefits of curriculum meant for the education of young children, especially children in preschool. There have been argument by some scholars that children below age 5 do not need to go to school for formal education (Postman, 2012). Some have even argued that children's rate of learning begins to diminish as soon as they start going to school (Postman, 2012). But with a well developed curriculum guide for children, one is able to show why children should be in school at that age of their development. The fact is that if the curriculum is not followed, there is the possibility that the education of young children would be handled like that of grownups. Temple and Raynolds (2007) have expressed the opinion that a high quality preschool programme exceeds most other educational interventions, especially those that

begin during school age, including reduced class size at primary classes, grade retention or youth job training.

The newly developed curriculum-Integrated Early Childhood Development Curriculum (IECDC)- is a curriculum guide for the education of children in Nigeria prior to their entry into the statutory primary education. A lot of Early Childhood Education principles were considered in the development of the curriculum. Some of these principles are the holistic development of the child; developmentally appropriate practices; multiple intelligences and the ideas of constructivism. All these make the features of the curriculum a little complex and require proper training for whoever is going to use it. These features, according to the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC, 2007), still need to be reviewed and areas requiring in-depth attention are discussed below.

The whole curriculum is divided into two sections, namely curriculum for children ages 0-3 years and curriculum for children ages 3-5 years. These sections make it possible to apply the principle of age appropriateness in the principle of developmentally appropriate practices. Each of these sections is presented under eight (8) themes, namely physical development, affective and psychosocial development, cognitive development, food and nutrition, health, water and environmental sanitation, safety measure and protection issues (one would have expected the themes to be different from learning domains as used here). These eight themes could be further divided into two broad parts—those that are content to be delivered to the children and those that are meant for the caregivers/teachers and the parents. The section for age 0-3 years is treated to reflect what is expected at 24months and 36months separately.

Every theme is broken down into a number of topics (one would have expected this to be sub-themes). Each topic is presented under the following headings: performance objectives (parent/caregiver, child); content, activities (parent/caregiver, child); teaching/learning materials and evaluation guide.

This is done so that the preschool teacher can identify the theme to be taught at what age level, the topic for each week, what should be the behavioural objectives, the content to be delivered, the activities

to be planned for the children, the materials to be used and how to evaluate the children learning. The complexity of the curriculum makes it impossible for the preschool teachers to see the benefits and strength of this curriculum.

There is a popular saying to the effect that a good curriculum in the hands of a bad teacher has already failed. This implies that teachers must be well trained on the delivery of the curriculum of any educational system. Besides, at the level of curriculum development, the implementers—the teachers—must be carried along in order to ensure that proper implementation of the curriculum is guaranteed.

Again, the features of the newly developed IECDC require that teachers are carried along for proper implementation of the curriculum. This is paramount because there is a radical shift from what the teachers are used to as preschool curriculum and what we have now. Besides, almost all the preschool teachers in the public schools are not trained as early childhood educators. These teachers are those with NCE and Degree qualifications in Primary Education studies. These set of teachers were transferred to preschool section of the public primary school to assist in the education of the preschool section. This was done without the consideration of the knowledge of the teachers about how preschool children learn. Therefore, for proper implementation of the newly developed curriculum, those teachers working at this level of education must be trained.

The necessity for the training of the teachers was felt by NERDC, the producer of the curriculum, hence national training programmes were organized to train the officials that handle Early Childhood Education matters in the ministries, the caregivers and the preschool teachers. Resource persons across the nation were invited. The objectives of the workshops are summarised as follows:

Awareness among the Users of the Curriculum

After the production of the curriculum, it was made available in all the NERDC branches across the nation for ministries and schools to buy. From 2004 to 2010 very few schools were aware of the existence of the curriculum. This fact was also confirmed during the workshop where almost all the participants declared that they had not seen

the curriculum before coming. Many of the participants had to buy as many as possible after the training for their respective schools. This awareness is highly important because it is the first thing that should be done for the curriculum to get to the end users.

Appropriate Use of the Curriculum

The workshops were to take the participants through the contents of the curriculum. The meaning and how to apply every part of the curriculum were covered. Despite the fact that a large proportion of the participants had at least NCE qualification, there is need to remind them about a lot of facts regarding curriculum and what the components stand for. How to plan the weeks' activities around a theme, how to break a theme to sub-themes for daily activities, how to select, derive and state behavioural objectives at Early Childhood Education level and how to evaluate children learning were adequately dealt with. The effects of the workshops were felt during the workshops' activities. A majority of the participants studied Primary Education Studies (PES) and not Early Childhood Education (ECE). This had negative effect on what they knew and how they thought children should learn. Therefore, a lot of misconceptions were corrected and the developmentally appropriate practices were exposed to the participants.

Uniformity in the Preschool Practices in both Privately and Publicly Owned Schools across the Nation

Many preschools across the nation have relied on various textbooks published by various authors for what to teach the children. How to teach solely rests on the experience of the teacher and the school management. Because of these, there have been varieties in the preschool practices, the content, assessment technique and the school setup. The workshops were carried out so as to equip the ministry officials with the common practices that will be allowed in the nation which have been planned and presented by the government body established for this purpose- NERDC. With this, the Ministry of Education in every state will be able to guide and monitor the preschool practices in both public and private schools under their supervision.

As good as this government plan about this workshop is, it can only be effective if the participants were able to learn effectively. Effective learning calls for the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies. Experience from national workshops organised by National Teacher Institute (NTI) to retrain Basic Education teachers on innovative instructional strategies so as to be able to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) reveals that a majority of the classes were held just like normal lectures in higher institutions. A majority of the resource persons adopted teacher-centred method of 'presenting and explaining' strategy. It is no wonder that a majority of those strategies and skills taught the teachers since 2006 can hardly be found in our school system today.

A workshop meant to equip participants with skills should be carried out using learner-centred strategies. The participants should be allowed to learn actively, and if possible, they should learn through hands-on/mind-on activities so as to make the learning functional (Dada, Granlund and Alant, 2006; Epstein, 2007; Marley, Levin and Glenberg, 2010). Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2004) defines workshop as a meeting of people to discuss and/or perform practical work in a subject or activity. The tone of many workshops in Nigeria is just like a lecture which is contrary to its meaning. It was against this background that the resource person invited to this workshop tried to determine the effect of activity-based method training workshop on the awareness, knowledge and intention to use integrated early childhood education curriculum by preschool teachers in Nigeria.

This study, therefore, was carried out to examine the extent to which the workshops will be able to achieve the following goals:

- a. To create awareness among the participants about the existence and the nature of the IECD curriculum across the nation.
- b. To instil in the participants the knowledge of the IECD curriculum in terms of the elements, arrangement and the provisions.
- c. To train participants on how to make use of and develop in them the intention to use the curriculum.

Methodology

This study was built into the training workshops organised by a National body known as Nigerian Educational Research and Development council (NERDC). Therefore, a descriptive survey research design using qualitative data was used to determine the impact of the training strategy on the awareness, knowledge and intention to use the IECD curriculum among the participants by measuring their pre and post training behaviour.

The population of the study was the entire participants in the training workshops in Ikeja, Lagos State (11th-14th October, 2011), Owerri, Imo State (14th -16th February, 2012) and Benin City, Edo State (27th – 29th November, 2012). The total number of the participants at the three workshops was 220. Since the population was clustered, all of them were involved in the study.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured interview. This interview was a self-designed instrument comprising two sections. Section A contained items such as the name of the respondents, their status, (that is, whether classroom teacher, school owner or ministry officials) and the state and the local government of the respondents. Section B of the instrument contained ten (10) items that cut across the awareness, the knowledge and the intention to use IECD curriculum. The instrument was validated by scholars in the field of Early Childhood Education, Curriculum and instruction and test and measurement. To complement this, a pocket tape recorder and digital camera were used to capture the activities and responses of the participants.

Three major activities were planned for every presentation which lasted for 2hours during every workshop; Firstly, exploration of the IECD curriculum. Ten (10) minutes is assigned for this activity after which the participants were allowed to present their findings and questions were asked to guide them. After presentation, the resource person quickly reminded the participants about information on element of curriculum and skills needed for the use of the curriculum for just 15 minutes. Second activity, a group activity was staged- Plan a lesson activity for age 0-2years. It is during this activity that the participants put into use the skills of setting behavioural objectives, selection of content, planning lesson activities

and setting evaluation items from the curriculum for age 0-2years plus. The activity used to last for 20 minutes and 10 minutes for presentation. The third activity is just like the second but this time, the lesson is plan for age 3 to 5years plus.

The administration of the instrument was built into the training programmes in form of questions and the responses were recorded. Some of the questions were asked before and after workshop activities while some were asked during the activities. Almost every participant was given room to share his/her view about every question. This is achieved by asking for contrary opinion after several answers must have been given to the question under discussion. Information collected was analysed using qualitative analysis. Item by item responses of the participants to the questions were analysed based on the research questions.

Awareness of the Participants about the IECD Curriculum before and after the Workshops

In order to address this, firstly, the participants were asked to bring out the IECD curriculum since they were informed to come with it. It was glaring that the participants were not aware of the existence of the curriculum because their responses were: ‘Which curriculum?’, ‘We do not have it’, ‘it is not available in our schools’, ‘where can we get it’ and so on.

Again, in order to confirm the lack of awareness of the participant, they were asked from where they have been getting those things they teach the children. The two major answers were given to this are ‘from textbooks’ and ‘as given to us by the head teachers’. To follow this up, the participants were asked why they did not attempt to buy the curriculum from the nearest NERDC office. But the participants’ answers were that they were not aware that there was any curriculum; that the curriculum was not introduced to them and that they were not informed about this curriculum.

The responses of the participants revealed that they were not aware of the newly developed curriculum before coming to the workshop. This was supported by the address delivered by the

Executive Secretary to NERDC, Professor Obioma G. (2011) at the first workshop in Lagos. In his words:

It has been observed that many ECD educators/teachers do not know how to use the IECD curriculum for effective delivery of ECD programmes in schools. In fact, many of you do not even aware or use the curriculum at all (page 2)

This could be as a result of the fact that after the curriculum was developed, it was not made available to the schools. The NERDC officials informed us that the Ministry of Education in all the states were informed about the curriculum and they were asked to get copies for their states from the nearest NERDC office but it was only Lagos State that responded to the call. The Ministry was supposed to distribute the curriculum to the schools.

Copies of the curriculum were available at the workshop centres for sale and the participants bought as many as possible. When the question about their awareness of the IECD curriculum was asked at the end of each workshop, the responses were in the affirmative. With this, it was affirmed that the workshops were able to create awareness about the IECD curriculum among the preschool teachers across the nation, hence the awareness of the participants after the workshops were seriously different from what it used to be before the workshops. This was achieved as a result of the various ways by which different resource persons used to expose the participants to the curriculum in question. Particularly, the author of this paper used activity-based which was learner-centred. Through this, the participants were made to study the curriculum, did some activities with it and were able to judge how relevant and suitable IECD curriculum is. Many research findings have shown that this type of activity-based instructional strategy is very effective in training people on given skills (The Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner, 2002; Macdonald and Twining, 2002; Reshetova, 2004; Dada, Granlund and Alant, 2006; Epstein, 2007; Marley, Levin and Glenberg, 2010).

Level of the Participants' Knowledge about the Curriculum after the Workshops

In order to have insight into the impact of the workshop on the participants' knowledge about the curriculum, three questions were asked at the beginning and at the end of each workshop. The first question asked to address this was for the participants to identify the elements of a curriculum. Out of the three different workshops, no one was able to identify the four elements of a curriculum in the right order. The erroneous answers given include 'syllabus', 'scheme of work', 'lesson plan', school subjects like 'English language', 'Mathematics'. But only one participant in the three workshops was able to mention 'objective' and was unable to mention any other element.

Another question here was for the participants to identify where the sources of objectives highlighted in the curriculum were. Only one participant from Lagos was able to mention 'from the society'. Other responses were not right. Some of such were 'the text books', 'the school subject matters', 'from the syllabus and the scheme of work', 'from the teachers' and so on.

The third question to address this was for the participants to state hypothetical behavioural objectives. Of all the responses, only one that was considered technically correct and developmentally appropriate to the level of preschool children was 'By the end of the lesson, pupils should be able to count up to 20 appropriately'. Others were either not correctly stated or are developmentally inappropriate. Some of these are 'At the end of the day, students should be able to know how to count', 'by the end of the lesson, pupils should be able to define family', 'at the end of the lesson, pupils should be able to explain different types of family'.

But at the end of each workshop, the same questions were asked and the responses were as presented. On the question about elements of a curriculum, majority of the participants was able to identify the element of curriculum as objective, content, methodology and evaluation. Besides this, the participants were made to identify where these elements were placed in the IECD curriculum-the second and the third columns on each page present the objectives; the fourth column presents the content; the fifth, sixth and the seventh column

present the methodology and the eighth column presents the evaluation were the correct responses given.

On the question about the sources of curriculum, after taking the participants through the curriculum, they were able to identify the sources of curriculum objectives as the society- Societal culture, norms, beliefs, needs; the needs of the recipients and at times, societal problems. The participants were also able to explain each of these to their best understanding.

When asked to state hypothetical behavioural objectives, participants were able to state behavioural objectives that were derived from the suggested objectives which also satisfied the conditions of a good behavioural objective and developmental appropriate. They were able to use measurable terms, the action words and the objects of the actions were stated; they were able to state behavioural objectives with givens and criteria and finally they were able state objectives that care for the average learners. The following are scanned examples of the stated objectives got from the participants:

Objectives

GROUP 1

① By the end of the day's activities age 3+ children
Should be able to:

(i) Say the name of at least 2 family members like
father, Mother, Sister, Brother etc.

(ii) Identify father, Mother and Children in picture book

(iii) Sing and dance to the song "members of the family"

Behavioural Objectives GROUP 3

① By the end of the day activities in age 4+
Children classroom, the children should be able to;

② Identify at least 3 living things around the
classroom.

(i) Sort out toys based on the primary colours.

(ii) paint living objects in colours of their choice

Group 7

2 At the end of the day activities, age 4 children should
be able to:

i tell his/her age / date of birth in a clear language.

ii at least use two-word sentence to tell the occupation of the
father or the mother

iii demonstrate how to take his/her measurement using the measure-
ment on the wall.

These scanned objectives are few from the numerous objectives which the participants were able to state in the group activities given to them. They were able to state these types of objectives because they had been taken through several examples by the resource person through an activity-based strategy. A close examination of these objectives shows that they had become aware that behavioural objectives should cut across all the developmental domains. Not only this, they were now aware that children learning should not be passive but hands-on/mind-on activities should be adequately planned for them. This finding corroborates the position of scholars like Richardson (1997), The Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner (2002) and Reshetova (2004) that activity-based strategy facilitates the learning of new skills, knowledge acquisition and the gaining of experience through active participation of learners in the process of knowledge acquisition.

The Extent to which Participants Exhibit Intention to use IECD curriculum in their Various Schools

To address this, two questions were asked at the end of each workshop. The first one was to seek the perception of the participants about appropriateness of the IECD curriculum to Nigerian children. The participants at the end of each workshop demonstrated love for the curriculum and reacted both in words and actions. In words, some of their comments were 'The content of the curriculum is appropriate and good for our children but to get it in our schools is the problem', 'Why is Government not distributing this curriculum to all schools so as to ensure its compliance?', 'In fact, it should be enforced on all privately owned schools at the point of seeking approval for the school' and so on.

In the action of the participants, it was observed that the entire curriculum brought down to the three workshop centres were always not enough for the participants to buy. The three workshops always ended with uproarious discussion between the participants and the NERDC officials about where the curriculum could be bought. The official (to be specific, the Director, Special Programme Center, NERDC, Dr. Kate Nwufo) used to add to her closing remarks that

the participants should visit the nearest NERDC branch office in their states for more copies.

The second question formulated to address the intention of the participants to use the IECD curriculum was to seek how they will ensure that the curriculum is strictly followed in their schools.

The participants who are teachers demonstrated their commitment to ensure that their schools make use of the curriculum since then. They promised to suggest further training to other teachers that were not in the workshop to the school administrators and that they would be ready to train their colleagues. Participants that were Desk Officers in the SUBEB offices also promised to suggest state level training to more teachers and that the curriculum would be made available to every registered school in their respective states. Those participants that were private school owners also promised to train their teachers on how to make effective use of the curriculum. However, they were not all totally convinced about the implementation of language of instruction policy because they felt it was contrary to what the majority of the parents wanted.

All these reactions by the participants revealed that they (the participants) intended to use the curriculum in their school. This could be as a result of the fact that they have not been using any comprehensive, integrated and holistic curriculum like the IECD. Also, it was made clear that the curriculum was published by the only governmental body in the country that was assigned such role-the NERDC- in collaboration with UNICEF. The minimum standard for Early Childhood Development centres in Nigeria was based on this curriculum (NERDC, 2007). The implication of this is that if there is any curriculum guide to be enforced in the nation, it is no other one than the IECD. This might have changed their attitude towards its use.

Conclusion

The rationale behind this study is to determine the effect of activity-based training workshops on the learning and skills acquisition of the participants. Nation-wide Workshops organised by NERDC on Training Early Childhood Development Educators/Teachers on the use of Integrated Early Childhood Development Curriculum were

used as avenue to carry out this study. The learning in this context is measured in terms of awareness and knowledge of and intention to use the IECD curriculum. The workshops were carried out three times, first in Ikeja, Lagos State; second in Owerri, Imo State and the third in Benin, Edo State. The participants from the Northern states of the country were made to come to Owerri and Benin because of security issues. Activity-based strategies were used for the presentation by this author in the three workshops and the entry behaviour as well as the post training behaviour were measured qualitatively using structured interview. The post behaviour showed not only better awareness, increased knowledge and good intention to use the IECD curriculum but also revealed participants' active involvement. Therefore, activity-based training workshop is considered highly effective, especially when the workshop is on skill acquisition.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered for workshop organisers, resource persons and NERDC in particular in order to make future workshops an avenue for participants' effective learning:

- ❖ The resource person delivering papers in a workshop on skill acquisition should consider activity-based strategies as the best instructional strategies that could be used. Though this will demand more from the resource person, there will be effective learning because the participants will be actively involved.
- ❖ Though at the end of each workshop, there was significant evidence that the participants had learnt a lot from the workshop, this might not be enough to ensure that the aim of the workshop has been achieved. It will be an ideal situation for NERDC to carry out a follow-up study to some sampled schools across the nation so as to ensure that the IECD curriculum is being used as expected and that the skills taught in the workshops are adopted.

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