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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: IMPLICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN RIVERS STATE.

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ABSTRACT
The study focused on the need for early childhood education: implication for sustainable national transformation in Rivers State. The purpose of the study was to investigate on the need for early childhood education and to determine if any relationship exists between early child education, the teacher, the curriculum and the environment. A total of 400 teachers (120 male and 280 female) were randomly selected from 40 pre-primary schools in Rivers State. The research questions and hypotheses for the study were analyzed and tested using mean and Z-test statistics at 0.05 level of significance. A validated instrument titled "Early Childhood Education (ECE) Questionnaire" was used for the study and its reliability co-efficient established at 0.75. The findings revealed that there was no significant difference between the perception of male and female teachers on relationship between the teacher and early childhood education. However, there was also no significant difference between the perception of male and female teachers on the relationship between the curriculum and early childhood education. It was recommended that Government should encourage and intensify ongoing efforts to strengthen the vision for the implementation of successful early childhood education programs which will aid in transforming and sustaining the nation.

Keywords: Early child, education, teacher, curriculum, environment, national, transformation.

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Introduction

There has been a heated debate over the last several decades about when the education of young children should begin. Literature has it that some researchers claim that growth and development start at birth or even during the prenatal period. Regardless of the earliest starting point, scientists who carry out brain development research have at least agreed with one key finding that learning during the early years is critical. The consensus seems to be that early exposure to learning experiences in a stimulating environment will lead children to perform better in primary schools (Buell, 2009). Investment in early childhood programmes is essential because they are vehicles used in the promotion of the child's right to survival, development and early education. According to UNESCO report (2008), two hundred million children around the world under age five do not develop adequately because they live in poverty and have poor health services, nutrition and care.

Early childhood education refers to a comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth to nine years of age with the active participation of their parents and teachers (Smith, 2015). Many developed countries have begun to turn their attention to early education of children from birth to pre-primary ages. In addition, more early childhood professionals have involved families and communities in order to improve quality care and development of young children especially from birth through age three. Buell (2009) noted that due to the proliferation of the variety of such programs, it has become critical to ensure program quality and administration. In accordance with the recent change in the climate of early childhood education, this trend seems to be spreading to developing countries as well. The global pre-primary gross enrollment ratio grew from 33% to 40% between 1999 and 2005 (UNESCO, 2008). The data confirms that more countries are advocating the compulsory pre-primary education programs of 5-year-old children, specifically before their entrance into formal primary education.

It is now widely acknowledged that the effects of what happen during the pre-natal period and during the earliest months and years of a child's life can

last a lifetime (Goffin & Wilson, 2011). This is because research findings show that the kind of early care a child receives from parents, pre-school teachers and minders determine how a child learns and relates in school and life in general (Katz, 2004). Katz also reiterate that, it is during early childhood care that a child develops all the key elements of emotional intelligence, namely confidence, curiosity, purposefulness, self-control, connectedness, capacity to communicate and cooperativeness. To promote early childhood programs and their quality, it is necessary to provide a policy framework of standards and norms that serve as the foundation of those programs. Every learning experience presents early childhood educators with choices of how to interact, encourage and manage the learning environment. The teacher may observe, intervene, support with questions, or listen, among the many possibilities, in an ongoing dynamic effort to enhance children's learning.

Scientific evidence has shown that the child's early years demand adequate protection, care and stimulation as the foundations for his or her well-being and development (Pence, 2004). In other words, fulfilling the child's well-being and basic needs both in terms of nourishment and nurturing, particularly from pregnancy to six years of age, recurrently demands not only technical but also more skillful human knowledge of what a healthy and happy childhood actually means to everyone as both a right and an absolute priority to be praised and guaranteed in any community or society. As claimed by Sowers (2008:92), "who ever works with children has to recognize within himself, his own childhood so as to promote the child's well-being". That is to say that giving these children the right start should be a commitment not only for those who interact with them, but also for those in charge of enacting public policies or deeply engaged in social responsibility actions.

The curriculum plans should be created and organized to assist in the process of creating challenging but achievable curriculum experiences. Educators define curriculum as an organized framework that delineates the content that children are to learn, the processes through which children achieve the identified curricular goals, what teachers do to achieve these goals, and the contexts in which teaching and learning occur (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 2015). Curriculum is not just

about activities, rather, it must reflect children's abilities, questions and interests, and provide experiences that are intentionally created with specific performance standards in mind. Teachers use curriculum to intentionally plan ways for children to construct knowledge in order to make sense of their experiences. A meaningful curriculum is integrated so that learning experiences encompass many content areas (Curtis and Carter, 2006). It must be based on children's interests and presented in a context that stimulates children to invest in their work. Children need to interact with the curriculum, explore it, utilize it, question it and evaluate it in their own way of learning. Children's engagement ensures purposeful and sustained learning.

Classroom environments must be carefully planned, prepared and maintained to invite children into learning experiences. Early childhood classrooms should have work areas or centers. Activities such as dramatic play, creative experiences, science and investigation, mathematical thinking, literacy experiences, writing, large and small group activities, quiet alone times, sand, water, clay experiences, woodworking, construction and music making should be practiced (Gullo, 2002). When establishing work areas, teachers must carefully choose locations, considering the purposes, materials and experiences anticipated in each. Safety should be an overriding concern in setting up an environment for young children. The environment should be safe, healthy and sanitary in compliance with state and local licensing requirements and fire safety codes.

The materials and physical arrangement of the classroom should create a sense of belonging. It is important that children feel this as an exciting and interesting place where they can try new things. Early childhood environments must reflect the amount of time children and adults spend together. Children are learning about themselves, their abilities and preferences as they interact with materials within the classroom environment. Room arrangements and materials should reflect and support their interests, skills, cultures and family values (Hendrick, 2015). They should be encouraged to bring materials from home, share their cultures and family experiences with others, thus, this broadens each child's choices and reflects the community's diversity.

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Statement the Problem

Investment and management of early childhood programme is essential for the promotion of the child's right to survival, development and early education. The effects of what happen during the pre-natal period and during the earliest months and years of a child's life can last a life time. It is evident that the child's early years demand adequate protection, care and stimulation as the foundations for his or her well-being and development. Consequently, one who works with children has to recognize his own childhood so as to be able to promote another child's well-being. This implies giving the child the right start and should be a commitment not only for those who interact with them, but also for those in charge of enacting public policies or deeply engaged in social responsibility action. Unfortunately, the Nigerian educational system lacks a Nigerian background and a well-defined ideology framework. The Nigerian child is left with no ideology direction. The industrialized nations of the world have made it a deliberate policy to educate their children in line with the official socio-political ideology of their respective countries. A lot of school children are not familiar with the Nigerian History and culture, and our value system has become elusive. However, only what they know is the recitation of the National pledge and anthem without anyone telling them the origin and history of the recitations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the need for early childhood education and its implication to sustainable national transformation in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of the teacher on early childhood education in Rivers State?
2. What is the impact of the curriculum on early childhood education in Rivers State?
3. What is the impact of the environment on early childhood education in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on the impact of the teacher on early childhood education in Rivers State.

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2. There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the teacher on the curriculum and early childhood education in Rivers State.
3. There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the teacher on the environment and early childhood education in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The population of this study was targeted at all the pre-primary school teachers in Rivers State. A simple random sampling was use in the selection of 400 teachers (120 male and 280 female) from 40 pre-primary schools in the State. The data for the study was gathered with a questionnaire titled "Early Child Education (ECE) Questionnaire". It was validated and its reliability co-efficient established at 0.75. It consists of 17 items used to elicit information relevant to the problems investigated. Data was analyzed using means and standard deviation. The response options of strongly agree (SA), agreed (A), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD) was weighted as 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. A criterion mean of 2.50 was established by dividing the sum of the weights with 4. Responses with grand mean of 2.50 and above were accepted (A) while responses below 2.50 were not accepted (NA). The hypotheses posed for the study was tested using the Z-test statistics.

Presentation and Analysis of DataResearch Question 1.What

is the impacts of the teacher on early childhood education in Rivers State?

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Table1. Impact of teacher on the early childhood education

S/N	Items	Male		Decision	Female		Remark
		X	SD	X	SD	X	
1	Teachers take good care of the children in class.	3.49	0.5	3.36	0.48	3.43	Accepted
2	Teachers are assigned to a specific child to take care of specially.	1.58	0.8	1.52	0.78	1.55	Not Accepted
3	Teachers play with the children often.	3.00	0.7	2.88	0.99	2.94	Accepted
4	Teachers ensure children take their lunch during break.	3.48	0.8	3.36	0.92	3.42	Accepted
5	Teachers always ask the children questions while teaching them.	2.69	1.1	2.54	1.17	2.62	Accepted

Table 1 shows that items 1, 3, 4, and 5 were accepted being that they were above the criterion mean (X) of 2.50 as impacts of the teacher on early childhood education while item 2 was not accepted as one of the impacts of the teacher on early childhood education.

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Research Question 2.
What is the impact of the curriculum on early childhood education in Rivers State?

Table 2. Impact of the curriculum on early childhood education.

S/N	Items	Male		Decision	Female		Remark
		X	SD	X	SD	X	
6	The children learn easily what is being taught.	3.49	0.50	3.36	0.48	3.43	Accepted
7	Teachers are provided with teaching aids while teaching in class	2.32	0.64	2.14	0.60	2.23	Not Accepted
8	Children are taught how to greet their elders	2.58	0.87	2.52	0.78	2.55	Accepted
9	Children are taught how to recite the national anthem	3.40	0.91	3.36	0.82	3.38	Accepted
10	Children are taught good hygiene	2.76	1.12	2.88	1.17	2.82	Accepted
11	Children are taught how to eat balanced diet.	2.52	0.76	2.63	0.67	2.57	Accepted

Table 2 shows that items 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 were accepted being that they were above the criterion mean (X) of 2.50 as impact the curriculum has on early childhood education while item 7 was not accepted as one of the impact the curriculum has on early childhood education in Rivers State.

Research Question 3. What is the impact of the environment on early childhood education in Rivers State?

Table 3: Impact of the environment on early childhood education

S/N	Items	Male			Female		Remark
		X	SD	X	SD	X	
12	The children always come to school on time.	3.49	0.5	3.36	0.48	3.43	Accepted
13	The classroom is always neat.	3.00	0.7	2.88	0.90	2.94	Accepted
14	Children are allowed to play around the school during break.	3.38	0.8	2.92	0.78	3.15	Accepted
15	Children seat comfortably in class	2.32	0.6	2.46	0.62	2.39	Not Accepted
16	Children are less than 20 in a class.	1.94	1.1	1.88	1.17	1.82	Not Accepted
17	Children make noise while the teacher is teaching.	1.96	0.7	1.95	0.67	1.96	Not Accepted

Results on table 3 shows that items 12 to 14 were accepted being that they were above the criterion mean (X) of 2.50 as impact of the environment on early childhood education while item 15 to 17 were not accepted as the impact of the environment on early childhood education in Rivers State.

Hypothesis1. There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impacts of the teacher on early childhood education in Rivers State.

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Table 4. The z-test of male and female teachers on impacts of the teacher on early childhood education

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Z-cal.	Z-crit.	Df	Level of significance	Decision
Male	120	2.58	0.82	0.44	1.96	398	0.05	Ho accepted
Female	280	2.54	0.89					

The data on table 4 shows that the Z-calculated value of 0.44 is less than the Z-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 398 degree of freedom. The null hypothesis was accepted. This means there is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impacts of the teacher on early childhood education in Rivers State.

Hypothesis 2. There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the curriculum on early childhood education in Rivers State.

Table 5. **The z-test of male and female teachers on impact of the curriculum on early childhood education**

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Z-cal.	Z-crit.	Df	Level of significance	decision
Male	120	2.54	0.72	0.62	1.96	398	0.05	Ho accepted
Female	280	2.61	0.81					

The data on table 5 shows that the z-calculated value of 0.62 is less than the z-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 398 degree of freedom. The null hypothesis is accepted. This means that, there is no significant difference between the perception of male and female teachers on the relationship between the curriculum and early child education in Rivers State.

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Hypotheses 3. There is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the environment on early childhood education in Rivers State.

Table 6. **The z-test of male and female teachers on impact of the environment on early childhood education.**

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Z-cal.	Z-crit.	Df	Level of significance	decision
Male	120	2.62	0.77	0.75	1.96	398	0.05	Ho accepted
Female	280	2.71	0.73					

The data on table 6 shows that the z-calculated value of 0.75 is less than the z-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance with 398 degree of freedom. The null hypothesis is accepted. This means that, there is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the environment on early childhood education in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The study reveals that there is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impacts of the teacher on early childhood education.It further revealed that teachers take good care of the children in class, teachers play with the children often; teachers ensure children take their lunch during break, and teachers always ask the children questions while teaching them all have a criterion mean above 2.50. It indicates that teachers make impacts on the child in the classroom. The teacher may observe, intervene, support with questions, or listen, among the many possibilities, in an ongoing, dynamic effort to enhance children's learning. Scientific evidence has shown that the child's early years demand adequate protection, care and stimulation as the foundations for his or her well-being and development (Pence, 2004). In other words, fulfilling the child's well-being and basic needs both in terms of nourishment and nurturing, particularly from pregnancy to six years of age, recurrently demands not only technical but also more skillful human knowledge of what a healthy and happy childhood actually means to everyone as

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both a right and an absolute priority to be praised and guaranteed in any community or society.

The study also revealed that there is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the curriculum on early childhood education in Rivers State. The children learn easily what is being taught, children are taught how to greet their elders, children are taught how to recite the national anthem and pledge, children are taught good hygiene and children are taught how to eat balanced diet all have a criterion mean above 2.50. This indicates that a relationship exists between the curriculum and early child education.

The curriculum plans should be created and organized to assist in the process of creating challenging but achievable curriculum experiences. It must reflect children's abilities, questions and interests, and provide experiences that are intentionally created with specific performance standards in mind. Curtis and Carter (2006) are of the opinion that a meaningful curriculum should be integrated so that learning experiences encompass many content areas. It must be based on children's interests and presented in a context that stimulates children to invest in their work. Children need to interact with the curriculum – to explore it, utilize it, question it and evaluate it in their own way of learning. Children's engagement ensures purposeful and sustained learning. Curriculum also must provide opportunities for children to see and explore who they are within the context of their family life and culture.

The study also revealed there is no significant difference between the male and female teachers on impact of the environment on early childhood education in Rivers State. Children always come to school on time, the classroom is always neat, and children are allowed to play around the school during break all have a criterion mean above 2.50. This shows that, there is a relationship between the environment and early child education. Classroom environments must be carefully planned, prepared and maintained to invite children into learning experiences. Early childhood environments must reflect the amount of time children and adults spend together. The space reflects the goals of the program, the age of the children, the daily traffic patterns and the climate of the class (Hendrick, 2015).

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The materials and physical arrangement of the classroom should create a sense of belonging. It is important that children feel this as an exciting and interesting place where they can try new things. Children are learning about themselves, their abilities and preferences as they interact with materials within the classroom environment. Room arrangements and materials should reflect and support their interests, skills, cultures and family values. They should be encouraged to bring materials from home, share their cultures and family experiences with others, thus, this broadens each child's choices and reflects the community's diversity.

Conclusion

There is need to provide a policy framework of standards and norms that will serve as foundation to promote early childhood programs. Investment in early childhood programmes is essential because they are vehicles to promote children's rights to survival, development and early education. It is during early care that a child develops all the key elements of emotional intelligence, namely confidence, curiosity, purposefulness, self-control, connectedness, capacity to communicate and cooperativeness. The curriculum plans should be created and organized to assist in the process of creating challenging but achievable curriculum experiences.

Recommendations

1. Government should encourage and intensify ongoing efforts to strengthen the vision for the implementation of successful early childhood education programs.
2. Teachers should be reflective and involved in decision making around curriculum and teaching strategies for successful early childhood education programs.
3. The teacher should support and guide young children through their active learning adventures and experiences.
4. Government should increase and channel more funds to the development of early child education.

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