

Effective Methods of Teaching and Learning: Developmentally Appropriate Practices in the Nigerian Early Childhood Pre-Primary Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the pre-primary school children's teaching and learning methods adopted in Nigerian schools. It explains the benefits of appropriate practices to both children and teachers and how teachers can best guide pre-primary school pupils to achieve effective learning. Some problems have been identified including the misuse of school in Nigeria to mean kindergarten or day-care and use of non-appropriate teaching and learning methods for this age group. The paper has discussed some methods as it applies to the age group addressed in this paper. It has given hints on issues to be considered in selection of learning methods. Some Nigerian teachers use teaching methods that do not match with the developmental level of the pupils which will affect the teaching and learning process. The paper therefore explained the characteristics of young children and used this understanding to guide the choice of teaching methods. Based on the discussions, relevant recommendations were made including that regular seminars should be organized for teachers on modern methods; and successful attendance at such seminars should form one of the conditions for teachers' promotion.

Keywords: methods, teaching, learning, pre-primary, education

Introduction

Pre-primary school education is meant to support the learning of children. Such learning unfortunately in Nigeria emphasizes academic learning of addition, subtraction and science. According to Korb (2016), many early childhood programmes in Nigeria have narrow view of early childhood education that includes only instruction in letters and numbers. This is evident in the approach to teaching and learning, using direct teaching method for academic development where children are, for example, drilled in reciting and reading letters of the alphabet and numbers. Children also learn vast amount of facts about places, people, events, cultures and issues through memorization and copying notes. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) have shown that the individual's thinking, creativity, initiative and intellectual independence are not developed through this kind of teaching method.

Modern research on the nature of children's learning have called for urgent change to teaching methods that are based on the nature of the child as well as nurture thinking, love for learning, creativity, originality, analytical and critical thinking in learning. They emphasized that the teacher's role should be preparing and arranging the learning

environment, the learning materials, the learning activities, but allow the children to discover, search, experiment and construct their knowledge of objects, people and events. Young children have incredible amounts of energy, like to explore new things but have a short attention span (Carlsson-Piaget, 2008). Children's inability to sit for extended periods of time is helpful to develop physical skills. Their energy and desire to explore enable them to be exposed to the many new things that they have to learn. Young children are sometimes called "Universal novices". This means that they know nothing (novices) about everything (universal). Children are easily distracted so that they can be exposed to everything (Korb, 2016).

Two major characteristics of a good and effective teacher are the knowledge of subject matter and use of appropriate methods of dispensing such knowledge to the learner. Teaching can be considered as an art, but the method or technique used in teaching is scientific. A teacher who masters his/her subject but has no method of teaching it, is not useful to the learners; therefore the use of appropriate method for a particular group is as important as the subject. If a teacher uses a teaching method that is not matched to the developmental level of the pupils, then learning will not occur. A Professor of Mathematics teaching five year old children the same way he teaches his PhD seminars will be ineffective, because the Professor's teaching method is not appropriate for his learners. Therefore, teaching entails knowing what to teach the learners and adopting appropriate methods of imparting the knowledge in the most effective way possible.

Research in science and industry has produced better and quicker methods of doing things. Also in education, research has pointed out more efficient methods for teaching. Several methods exist which the pre-school teacher can employ to facilitate children's learning, with their limitations, advantages and ways of utilizing them.

Concept of early childhood education

Early childhood education, as contained in the National Policy on Education (NPE) (FRN, 2004), is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten. Esomonu (2005) sees the pre-primary education as the education given in an educational institution to children aged three to five years, prior to their entering the primary education.

The idea of having children educated early has been of great interest to various countries and cultures in the world. As reported by Maduewesi (1990), the early Greeks such as Socrates (469-399BC), Plato (425-347BC), Aristotle (384-322BC) and others before and after them, all spoke about the education of the child. According to Kolawole (1989), pre-primary education is the education given to children before the age of six years in Nigeria. The purposes include to effect a smooth transition from the home to school, prepare the child for the primary level of education, provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work, inculcate social norms and teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes among many others through play.

Early childhood education is of immeasurable importance for the total development of the child. It provides the needs of a child since parents cannot be expected to possess the skill and time required for the new methods of handling children. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC, 2007) noted that children cannot get as much of what they need at home as in a nursery school. Therefore Korb (2016) solicits that all children, particularly from the age of two, should be part of the early childhood education in the neighbourhood school.

The curriculum of children in early childhood programmes should focus on holistic development and also should include content that is appropriate to the developmental level of young children.

Good early childhood programmes should use teaching methods that are developmentally appropriate for the young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2008). This implies that educational practices should be matched to the developmental level of the learner; the goal of developmentally appropriate practice is to promote optimal learning and development by providing educational practices that are matched to the developmental level of the child. Thus, teachers should understand the unique developmental characteristics of young children and use this understanding to guide their choices about teaching methods they use.

Types of pre-primary early childhood schools

Currently in Nigeria, pre-primary instruction is designed to introduce children, between the ages of three to six, to a school environment and thus provide a bridge between the home and school environments (Baguma & Atheisibwe, 2011). Crèche/day-care is a care programme for children from three to five years of age. Nursery I classes are typically for children aged three and four and Nursery II classes are typically for children aged four to five. Nursery programmes provide both care and education for children. The year before entering primary school has many different names in Nigeria, including pre-primary, kindergarten, higher kindergarten, or Nursery III. These programmes are for children, typically five years of age, to help them learn the basics of literacy, numbers, science, and social studies in preparation for primary school. The goal of early childhood education is to support both the learning and development of young children. However, such programmes in Nigeria unfortunately neglect the development component and emphasize on the learning aspect. This is evident in the approach to teaching and learning, using direct teaching method for academic development where children are, for example, taught through drilling and memorization. Modern research on the nature of children's learning have called for urgent change to teaching methods; teachers should allow young children to explore, discover, search, experiment, and construct their knowledge of objects, people, and events; these lay a solid foundation for lifelong learning when the right attitudes and skills for learning are inculcated in pupils and right methods adopted by the teachers.

Developmentally appropriate learning

Psychology teaches that children have very short attention span; meaning that children's attention span at learning is short but large at play. They cannot sit down in one place for a long time, unlike adults. Despite this, children are involved in direct instruction as main approach by teachers to learn through lecture method and memorization. For example, pre-primary school pupils may be required to recite numbers, letters, thirty-six states and their capitals, and copy from the board with little or no break time.

The principle that educational practice should match the developmental level of the pupils is the essence of what experts called developmentally appropriate teaching. Developmentally appropriate teaching means that educational practice is rooted in research about how young children develop and learn (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). The goal of developmentally appropriate teaching is to promote optimal learning and development for children. Developmentally appropriate learning means that educational practices are matched to the developmental level of the children. Thus, teachers should understand the unique developmental characteristics of young children and use this understanding to guide their choices about the teaching methods they use, especially methods that will aid learning at pre-primary school level. Children love to play and see work as play; so when teaching and learning are planned in playful ways, children learn better.

The goal of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programmes is to enable young children to thrive as they are learning and developing. Using developmentally appropriate practices enables young children to thrive at the level that they are currently, which then builds a solid foundation for future growth and development (Korb, 2016). Child-centred approach to learning is about the most appropriate approach to learning for pre-primary school children, for it ensures the active involvement of pupils in the learning process. At the pre-school level, effective and appropriate approach to learning is when pupils are engaged. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) point out that for pre-school age children, "Learning goes from hand to head." This implies that children learn by doing, with hands-on activities, such as counting using sticks, beads, smooth small stones and bottle tops, working with clay and paper mache, building with blocks, painting and drawing in a playful way.

There is a popular saying that "What I do I understand." This is very true of children generally; therefore, when a pre-school child is allowed to do things by himself or herself, and is reinforced by what he or she does, the child will develop skills needed for doing what he/she does. In other words, the child acquires the special skill of doing certain things through practice. This implies that children should be given opportunity to do things themselves. There should be a variety of play and learning materials which could be bought or improvised by the teacher or parents in order to achieve this goal.

Developmentally appropriate teaching methods in early childhood education

Teaching methods are techniques or strategies employed while teaching pupils. In education, teaching content and methods should be matched to the developmental nature of the learner for effective learning, most importantly at pre-school level. If a teacher uses teaching methods that do not match with the developmental level of the pupils, then learning will not occur. The principle that educational practices should be matched to the developmental level of the learner is the essence of what experts call developmentally appropriate practice. The aim of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programmes is to enable young children to thrive as they are learning and developing. To achieve this, educationalists have identified key principles that teachers should follow in order to apply developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). One of the principles is that structured play is an important teaching method for developing language, thinking skills, and social skills. This does not necessarily mean that children should be allowed to play however they want. Instead, educators can provide learning activities that allow children to learn through playful teaching methods. For example, children can learn mathematics by playing with objects of various shapes, playfully counting various objects, and playfully sorting objects of different colours and shapes.

Incorporating play as a method of teaching and learning is very important in pre-school. Using this method in a pre-school involves incorporating the various learning activities in a subject into play. Maria Montessori and Fredrich Froebel are popular for their success in achieving meaningful learning with children through play way method. Article 31 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child, in 1989, sets the stage for legitimizing of the child's right to play. This informed the inclusion of this right in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (NERDC, 2007). Also, one of the resolutions and declarations of Organization Mondiale Pour L'Education Prescolaire (OMEP) in 2015 is the continual use and promotion of play in early childhood education as a developmentally appropriate practice (Hagai & Shwamut, 2016). For these reasons, Early Child Care and Development Education (ECCDE) authorities and teachers should incorporate play activities into children's daily learning activities, because it is the children's right and the best medium through which they learn.

Play is children's legitimate right and a developmentally appropriate way to teach them. It should be incorporated into ECCDE programmes because of its importance, and in order that standard can be attained and maintained. In a review of play in general, Ginsburg (2007) indicated the following benefits of play:

- 1) Nurtures healthy brain development
- 2) Promotes social and character development as children play together with other children
- 3) Improves decision making skills
- 4) Nurtures leadership skills and interpersonal skills
- 5) Enables children to discover their interests

- 6) Enhances confidence and resilience
- 7) Builds active and healthy bodies
- 8) Allows children to create and explore a world and conquer their fears
- 9) Develops creativity

Other appropriate methods for teaching in early childhood education

1. Child centred method

Child centred method is a method of teaching where the children are more active than the teacher. In a classroom where child-centred approach is used, the teacher should know the child as an individual with his talents and difficulties. Good visual aids in current use should be displayed. The classroom should be bright and colourful with pupils' best work carefully displayed. Interesting learning should be mapped out in the classroom, such as nature, reading, science, mathematics, and creativity centres. The teacher should plan the lessons with the pupils' needs in view. There should be more pupils' activities than teacher activities. The aim of child centred method is to make the child happy and interested in his work.

2. Questioning method

Questioning is versatile and can be used at every stage of the lesson to serve different purposes. Questions are statements for which a reply is expected. Questions constitute an important tool of teaching in the hands of a skilful teacher (Agusiobo & Olaitan, 1981). Mayer (1978) maintains that with appropriate types of questions, pre-school children can be encouraged to do more complex thinking.

3. Group method

Group method is a method in which the class is divided into small groups for a particular learning activity. It is a modification of class teaching. It can be used to simplify the problem of teaching big classes with wide range of abilities. When the class is divided into small groups, one can attend to each group in turn while help is given to individual pupils in difficulty. The aim of this method is to encourage interaction and relationship building among children.

4. Story telling method

A story is description or account of things that have happened. According to the BBC English Dictionary (Sinclair, 1992), a story is a description of imaginary people and events, which is written or told in order to entertain people. Story telling is a way of narrating or describing a past event or an imaginary people. Teacher tells story to give children enjoyment at preschool, to train children's imagination, give children first-hand information, train their character, broaden their knowledge of their own culture, and develop children's oral expressions.

1. Project method

A project is the cooperative study of a real life situation by a class under the guidance of the teacher. Project method is one of the most effective ways of arousing interest. It is also a method in which the pupil is responsible for the planning and organizing of the work but supervised by the teacher (Esomonu, 2005). Again, the role of the teacher in pre-school level is to provide material as the need arises and encourage the pupils by showing a lively interest in their work while the project is in progress.

2. Discussion method

Discussion is a learning process which requires team work among learners. The method is based on the principle that knowledge and ideas of many people have a greater merit than that of a single person. For discussion to yield any satisfactory results, you should plan with care. There should be reasons why one decides to use the discussion method. However, one should not allow discussion to be dominated by bright pupils but see it as an opportunity to help those who are lacking in self-confidence and cannot interact easily.

3. Demonstration method

To demonstrate means displaying something. Demonstration can be done by the teacher or pupil either in groups or individually. This could also refer to display of objects, equipment or materials for exhibition. At pre-school level, one can use demonstration with some restrictions. It is a method used to show the child what to learn and how to learn the task. Whatever the teacher wants the pupils to do, he does it first. This method can be used to teach physical education (Esomonu, 1998).

4. Activity method

Regina (1981) maintain that the purpose of using activity method in teaching is to give the child an opportunity to grow and learn in his own way and to provide each child with suitable experience at the precise moment of his need. Since a child learns best by doing and finds interest and enjoyment in activity, a child must be given every opportunity to discover, to explore, to find out for himself by feeling and handling variety of objects. Ndagi (1985) stated that a good teacher includes pupils' activities as an important step in every lesson he prepares for the pre-school pupils.

5. Phonic method

Phonic means sounds made in speech. Phonic method is a method of teaching people to read based on the sounds that letters represent (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2000). It is generally accepted that if children are to learn to read, they must first learn to associate printed letters with the speech sounds they represent (Bajah & Ade-Ajayi, 1985). In Nigeria, the pre-school teachers who are familiar with the phonics approach have used it with some measure of success in getting children to read. By using a variety of active and engaging learning methods, pre-schoolers thrive in early childhood education and make learning real, interesting and appealing to the eye of the pre-schoolers.

Conclusion

Children have their own ways of learning which may not be in line with those of adults. As the demand for early childhood care and educational programmes increases, it is important that teachers, parents, and care-givers should understand the powerful role that play, discussions, explorations, storytelling and learning centres has in the learning and development of young children. Early childhood education programmes should incorporate a variety of active and engaging learning methods to help young children thrive in early childhood education.

Suggestions

- 1) Early childhood teachers should use educational practices that require active involvement.
- 2) Learning centres should be provided in all early childhood classrooms as this will provide an opportunity for pupils to become actively involved in the learning process.
- 3) Teachers should include greeting time at the beginning of the day; this is useful to teach language and social skills.
- 4) Teacher should incorporate storytelling into every subject.
- 5) Direct instruction is not the most effective teaching strategy, and should be limited to only 10-20 minutes at a time.
- 6) Watching of television should be seriously controlled in early childhood programmes because of the harmful effect that watching television can have on young children's development.

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