Psychosocial Characteristics of Pre-School Posing Challenges in Early Childhood Education in Umuahia Metropolis: Guidance and Counselling Remedy

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Abstract

This study investigated the psychological and social characteristics of pre-school that pose challenges in early childhood education in Umuahia metropolis and the guidance programme that could minimize the challenges. Descriptive survey design was employed. Four research questions and one hypothesis guided the study. The sample size was the total population of seventeen teachers in the six public nursery schools in Umuahia of Abia State, drawn using purposive sampling technique. Child Guidance services against pre-school challenges questionnaire, duly validated and with reliability value of 0.88, using cronbach Alpha was the instrument used for data collection. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation and t-test statistics for research questions and hypothesis respectively. The findings showed that anti-social features of children constituted the social characteristics of the pre-school while emotional traits form their psychological characteristics and their challenges, respectively. Provision of adequate guidance approach through self-regulation, observational learning, modeling and teaching of successful life skills could cater for the emotional and social needs of the pre-school and in turn help to minimize the challenges. The difference between the opinions of the nursery school teachers was not significant. Conclusion was that child guidance-counsellors are required in the nursery schools to play their distinct roles in the emotional and social life of the kids. One recommendation was that the pre-school teachers, parents and counsellors must work as a team to achieve success in early childhood education in Abia State.

Keywords: Early childhood Education, Psychological and social characteristics, challenges and counselling.

Introduction

Earl childhood education (ECE) also known as nursery education, pre-school education, kindergarten or Head start is a branch of education that relates to the teaching of children who are below the official school starting age. It describes the period of learning that takes place from birth to five years and the learners are called pre-school. National policy on Education

refers to early childhood education as the education given to children prior to their entering the primary school.

There are several types of early education programmes including those that are Federal, State, Mission or privately funded. Generally, their educators are responsible for caring and educating the young children at different years or levels. In terms of human development, the importance of ECE cannot be over stated. A child's early years are the foundation for his or her future development, providing a strong base for life-long learning and learning abilities including cognitive, emotional and social development. Shaughnessy and Kleyn (2018) related that pre-school education exposes children to positive and stimulating experiences and has a major impact on their future development.

Early childhood Education (ECE) helps to have early identification of strange behaviours in children. For instance, it helps to pick up behaviours that are indicative of self-injurious in the children (Morison, 2020). Such behaviours include eye poking, self-biting, head banging and skin picking.

The major purpose or aim of ECE is to provide children with strategies that help them develop the emotional, social and cognitive skills needed to become lifelong learners, while part of the ECE curriculum is to prepare children to play, interact and engage in age appropriate developmental activities that will assist in their socialization processes. In it, courtesy, appropriate behaviour "give and take" and learning the rules of various childhood games are emphasized. It equally involves programmes to promote children's optimum growth and development (UMass Global Education News (nd))

Overall, the objective of early childhood education is to support young children's growth and development in a holistic way, setting them up for success in all areas of their lives.

Early childhood Education (ECE) has become a vital integral robust part of Nigerian education. This study focuses on Abia State funded early childhood education, which focuses on the critical developmental milestones, skills and concepts that children attain in the period from age zero to five years of their lives. In Abia State especially Umuahia metropolis, ECE seems to be gaining much ground due to changes that are prevalent in the Nigerian society. Many children are found in the nursery sections of schools but this is not without challenges and difficulties facing the kids and their teachers respectively; that are capable of hindering the success or realization of the major purpose of ECE. Neglect, omission of care that can lead to harm, exposure to harm, physical and sexual abuse, emotional maltreatment, insecurity, kidnapping among others seem to be the challenges of the pre-school or the young children in ECE settings in Umuahia township (Chikwado et al., 2021).

Some of these challenges could be traced to the psychological and social nature of children's development. Scholars such as Gartress (2018), Emega and Kanyima (2018) attributed most children's problems in the ECE to the relational patterns of children. The trio stressed that children's relational patterns which constitute their social characteristics are at three levels namely survival relational level, adjustment relational level and encounter level and that at each level, the child is vulnerable to problems, that if not carefully handled using appropriate programme such as child guidance approach could affect children's progress towards life-long learning and self-discipline.

The relational patterns are the processes with which children relate to situations, persons and things in the school and home environments. Kagan (2018) stressed that at the survival level of the relational pattern, the child is concerned about getting through time and space. For instance, the child prefers to keep things constant and reduces the amount of change in his world. If a child is living in home environment that is hostile, dangerous or painful, there is the tendency for his behaviour at school to be affected. When his choice is confronted by a new situation such as classroom or school situation, whether a peaceful or loving environment, he will ignore its special demands and treat it as if it is not different from the previous situation.

A pre-school at 2 to 3 years could cry and refuses to stop or calm himself down until his usual demands are met. This could attract neglect by his teachers especially when it seems a routine or habit. At the survival level, the pre-school may not understand the proper ways to satisfy their needs. Some keep struggling for other children's toys, food, water, snacks among others while majority do not know how to calm down themselves when angry or upset. These predispose them to all sorts of maltreatment by their teachers who also experience some difficulties handling them.

The children in ECE need to be taught the proper ways of satisfying their needs and surviving without having to struggle or fight their way through. They can learn this through observational learning. This is why this study is based on social cognitive theory in which Bandura (2001) emphasized that children of 2-3 years can learn what adults are doing through observation, imitation and self-reward in the development of behaviours. This could be the rationale for Bronson (2017) to relate that exposing pre-school to role play, drama, etc could go a long way to help them overcome the challenges accruing from their relational patterns. Ajidahun (2018) advocated the use of modeling techniques of guidance to inculcate in the children the correct ways of behaving.

The second level of relational pattern of children that seems challenging to their security at school is the adjustment level. According to Martin (2017), at this level, the pre-school does not know how to adjust their behaviours to stranger's especially when a stranger is offering them gifts or something to entice them. This makes some children to fall prey to kidnappers who use baits to lure them into their traps, abuse them physically and or sexually or use them for money or ritual purposes. Martin (2017) and Ajidahun (2018) posited that dramatizing in class of pre-school the dangers in following a stranger could help the children learn how to adjust their behaviour to strangers.

Another relational pattern of children that pose challenges to life and socialization processes if not adequately guided seems to be the encounter relational level when children are interested in exploring their environment without considering their safety and certainty of what they are doing. In view of this, Platnilic and Kouyoumdjian (2021) asserted that at the encounter level, children would want to be autonomous and do their own thing their own way. The pre-school would want to initiate their own ways of doing things and so make a lot of mistakes which could eventually make them to adopt more in- appropriate behaviours and carry them out on their own. The extent relational patterns of children constitute the characteristics of social development posing challenges in ECE is yet to be ascertained.

Social development here refers to how a person develops a sense of self or a self-identity, relationships with others and develop the kind of social skills important in personal interactions. According to developmental psychologists (Harlow, 2015), Gartress (2017, Kagan, 2021), important social skills that children are to be given the opportunities to learn in pre-school

education include how to interact with others including strangers, manage their behaviours, react to others, situations, express needs, wants and feelings constructively. Others include how to cooperate with peers and differentiate acceptable from unacceptable behaviours (Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren, 2011), Plotnilic and Kouyoumedijian (2018) also reported that non-social or anti-social characteristics of children pose enormous challenges in their formative years.

However, some other scholars seem to opine that some emotional traits of children such as self-regulation, empathy, attention deficit, hyper-activity etc are among the major sources of the pre-school challenges. Vos and Baumeister (2014) related that children generally are not self-regulating in terms of voluntary internal control of behaviour. Self-regulation concerns socially acceptable ways based on reasoning, concerns for others and having full knowledge of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Many of them lack self-regulatory principle. They cannot resist temptation, control their negative impulses or delay gratification of anything given especially when violence is not involved. These could attract emotional maltreatment and or kidnapping. Thus, the pre-school needs special programmes to learn to achieve greater self-regulation to help them become prospective lifelong learners with appropriate personalities. The necessity of this comes to mind when considering the fact that by the age 5 years, essential social and personality development in human beings have been completed and children only build on what they have developed (Bronson, 2018). Since children can learn what is expected of them by imitating significant adults their self-regulation can be influenced positively at school through modeling by trained personnel such as guidance-counsellors.

Other emotional or psychological traits that could pose challenges are empathy and guilt. According to Martin (2021), by the age 2-3 years, children exhibit empathy and guilt that negatively impact on their brain development. Empathy is the ability to detect different emotions in others, to feel what another person feels and to respond emotionally. In the ECE, a child can be seen crying continuously when he sees another child crying, exhibit non-adherences to rules and regulations, yet as human beings, they are expected to learn to understand that we are separate with our own feelings, responses and perspectives. Some children are selfish, push, pushy and some exhibit unsupportive actions, anxiety disorder, attention deficit, hyperactivity (Douglas and Finkelhur, 2011). Their negative feelings, stereotype prejudices about others pose problems that could affect the way their brain develop for both present and future learning. Thombson (2014) suggested that the emotional traits of the pre-school can be effectively molded through adequate guidance approach in early childhood education settings.

Guidance approach in this context refers to guidance and counselling services that focus on child guidance in which children are taught the need to get along with others, express feelings in acceptable ways. It *guides children to the behaviour you want them to do instead of the behavior you don't want them to do. For example, use precise instructions like**, "Walk," "Use your inside voice," or "Sit in your chair" as opposed to "Don't run," "Don't yell," or "Don't climb on the table."** Ajidahun (2018) asserted that child guidance approach is based on the idea that teaching children how to behave, react to others and situation and effectively mould children's emotions. In the present study, the researchers are interested in finding out the psychological and social characteristics of children that pose challenges to the pre-school in ECE.

Statement of the problem

Early childhood Education seems to be gaining much ground recently in Abia State especially in Umuahia township due to the changes that are prevalent in Nigerian Society. Many children are now found in nursery schools including under aged ones or infants, many are experiencing what their mates of yester years never experienced.

Some children in the pre-school centres are suffering neglect, physical and sexual abuse, harm, kidnapping and emotional maltreatment of all sorts while some have been lured into attempted kidnapping and killing because of their relational patterns especially poor behaviour adjustment to strangers who entice them with baits such as sweet, biscuits, etc, lack of self-regulatory principle and other emotional traits of such as empathy, guilt, anxiety disorder, attention deficit, hyper activity among others that hinder their progress towards life-long learning and self-discipline.

Some developmental psychologists tend to suggest that some developmental social and emotional characteristics of the children that predispose them to the challenges and appropriate guidance programme have not been identified and utilized respectively. And considering the fact that if the pre-school continues to suffer the challenges posed by their psychological (emotional) and social characteristics, the aim of Early Childhood Education which hinges on helping the pre-school to acquire skills to become life-long learners and appropriate personalities can hardly be achieved.

It therefore becomes necessary to identify the psychosocial characteristics and the challenges posed by them in addition to the guidance services in the form of psychological and social needs of the pre-school that could help to minimize the challenges. Hence the need for this study.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to identify psychological and social characteristics of children that pose challenges to the pre-school in Early Childhood Education. The specific objectives were to:

1. Find out the psychological characteristics that pose challenges to the pre-school in Umuahia metropolis of Abia State;
2. Find out the social characteristics that pose challenges to the pre-school;
3. Identify the challenges of the pre-school in the Early childhood Education settings.
4. Examine the guidance programme to cater for the psychosocial needs of the pre-school that could help to minimize the challenges;

Research Questions: The following research questions were answered:

1. What are the social characteristics that pose challenges to the pre-school?
2. What are the psychological characteristics that pose challenges to the pre-school in Umuahia metropolis of Abia State?
3. What are the challenges posed by the psychosocial characteristics of the pre-school?
4. What form of Guidance and counselling could help minimize the challenges?

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H0$_1$: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of pre-school teachers on the guidance approach for minimizing the challenges of the pre-school in ECE in Umuahia Metropolis ($P<0.05$).

Methodology

The study employed descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey research design according to Shields and Rangarajan (2016) is used to describe characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied. It does not answer questions about how, why or when the characteristics occurred; rather it addresses the what question.

The population of the study comprised all the 17 pre-school (Nursery) teachers in 6 public schools in Umuahia township that participated as the sample size also, drawn from nursery levels 1-3, using purposive sampling technique. A 30-item questionnaire designed by the researchers titled Child Guidance Services against Pre-school Challenges Questionnaire (CGSPCQ), was the instrument used for data collection. The Questionnaire consists of four sections – A, B, C and D. Section A contained the bio-data of the respondents such as Name of school. Nursery level/class taught, years of nursery teaching (experience) etc. Section B – C consist of 8 items each on the psychological and social characteristics of the pre-school and their concomitant challenges, respectively, while sections D and E contained 8 and 6 items on the challenges and particular Guidance approach or services respectively. The items were designed on a 4-point rating scale of strongly Agree (SA)**,** Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly disagree (SD), with weights as 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively.

The instrument was face validated by three research experts in Guidance and Counselling, Early childhood Education and Measurement and Evaluation, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike. The reliability and stability of (CGSPCQ) was obtained through test re-test, in which the instrument was administered to 10 private nursery school teachers in Ubaka on 2 occasions of 2 weeks interval. After computation using Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient procedure, a stability value of 0.79 was obtained and on single administration, internal consistency reliability value of 0.88 using cronbach Alpha method was obtained, indicating that the CGSPCQ was both stable and reliable for the study.

The researchers administered the instrument and collection was on spot. Hence 17 copies were administered and retrieved, representing 100% return rate. Data collected were analyzed using mean, standard deviation and t-test statistic to answer the research questions and test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance respectively. Strongly Agree and Agree were collapsed as Agree while Disagree and strongly disagree were collapsed as Disagree.

Any mean score from 2.50 and above was considered as agreement whereas any mean score below 2.50 was considered as disagreement. t-cal less than t-crit means H$_0$ not rejected but t-cal. greater than t-crit means H$_0$ rejected.

Results

1. **Research Question 1:** What are the social characteristics of children that pose challenges to the pre-school in Early child-hood Education in Umuahia Metropolis?

Table 1: Responses on social characteristics of children that pose challenges in ECE

S/N	Items statements (Relationship with persons, situations and things)	Responses						Remark
		SA	A	D	SD	X	SD	
1.	Most pre-school prefer being on their own until their parents come to take them home and this makes teachers to neglect them	9 (36)	4 (12)	1 (2)	3 (3)	3.1	0.1	Agree
2.	Some ignore teachers and so teachers care less about them.	5 (20)	5 (15)	2 (4)	4 (4)	2.53	0.02	Agree
3.	Most nursery children cry in order to get their needs and this results in their being maltreated by teachers.	10 (40)	1 (3)	1 (3)	5 (5)	2.9	0.01	Agree
4.	Some steal other children's snacks, food or water and teachers try to stop them by flogging them mercilessly	11 (14)	1 (3)	2 (4)	3 (3)	3.2	0.1	Agree
5.	Some often struggle with other children's game items (ball, toys etc) and so receive beating using hand by the teachers	7 (28)	4 (12)	1 (2) `	5 (5)	2.8	0.4	Agree
6.	Nursery children follow quickly any strangers that offer them biscuits or sweets through which some have been kidnapped	11 (44)	3 (12)	2 (4)	1 (1)	3.6	0.1	Agree
7.	Pre-school children do their own things their own ways which lead them to making mistakes or misbehave	9 (36)	5 (15)	2 (4)	1 (1)	3.3	0.02	Agree
8.	Almost all the children in this nursery operate in the school environment without being certain of safety and this exposes them to harm	12 (48)	4 (12)	0 (0)	1 (1)	3.6	0.1	Agree

Data on table 1 show that all the 8 items have their respective mean scores above the cut-off mean of 2.50 with standard deviation range between 0.1 to 0.02. This implies that teachers perceived that relational patterns of the pre-school are among the social characteristics that pose challenges in ECE. The standard deviation indicates that the teachers were not far from each other in their opinions.

Research Question 2: What are the psychological characteristics of the pre-school that pose challenges in the ECE?

Table 2: Responses on the psychological characteristics of the pre-school that pose challenges.

S/N	Items statements (Emotional Traits: self-regulation, empathy etc)	Responses						Remark
		SA	A	D	SD	X	SD	
9.	Pre-school children are unable to control their negative impulses and so fall into traps of punishment by teachers.	12 (48)	2 (6)	1 (2)	2 (2)	3.4	0.1	Agree
10.	Nursery children cannot delay gratification or refuse gifts given to them when violence is not used through which some have been abused physically and or sexually	14 (56)	1 (3)	1 (2)	0 (0)	4.2	0.01	Agree
11.	Many children here do not know how to avoid temptation from strangers and so some have experienced attempted kidnapping	10 (40)	3 (9)	2 (2)	2 (2)	3.2	0.02	Agree
12.	Most of our nursery children have no knowledge of what is expected of them, because of which they misbehave often	12 (48)	3 (9)	2 (6)	0 (0)	3.7	0.11	Agree
13.	A child of 2-3 years here can cry when he sees another child crying and so keeps him-self moody.	15 (60)	2 (6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.9	0.01	Agree
14.	Children of 4-5 years here are often made to feel guilty when they disobey class rules set for them	8 (32)	3 (9)	1 (2)	5 (5)	2.8	0.2	Agree
15.	The pre-school here displays temper tantrum a lot that lead to their being physically abused by their teachers.	6 (24)	3 (9)	1 (2)	8 (8)	2.50	0.03	Agree
16.	Most of the children in the nursery are so hyperactive that some teachers flog school phobia into them.	10 (40)	5 (15)	0 (0)	1 (1)	3.2	0.1	Agree

Table 2 shows that the mean score of each of the 8 items is highly above the cut-off mean of 2.50 with standard deviation between 0.1 to 0.3. This implies that the teachers are of almost the same opinion that the psychological characteristics of the pre-school that pose challenges to them are mainly their emotional traits.

Research questions 3: What are the challenges posed by the psychosocial characteristics of the pre-school?

Table 3: Challenges posed by the psychosocial characteristics of the pre-school.

S/N	ITEMS statements	Responses		REMARK
	The following are some of the challenges the pre-school experience as a result of their emotional and social nature.	X	SD	
17.	Emotional Maltreatment	3.0	0.1	Agree
18.	Neglect	2.7	0.01	Agree
19.	Sexual abuse	3.5	0.02	Agree
20.	Physical abuse	3.5	0.02	Agree
21.	Kidnapping/attempted kidnapping	3.5	0.02	Agree
22.	School phobia	2.8	0.1	Agree
23.	Harm/Risk/unsafe condition	3.4	0.02	Agree
24.	Non-provision of physical, emotional, social and educational needs	3.2	0.1	Agree

Table 3 shows that the mean scores of all the items range from 3.5 to 2.8, with standard deviation ranging between 0.1 and 0.02. This implies that items 17 to 24 are some of the emotional and social problems or needs the pre-school faced by their psychosocial characteristics.

Research Questions 4: What form of guidance and counselling that could help to minimize the challenges?

Table 4: Responses on guidance and counselling services for minimizing the challenges.

S/N	ITEMS statements	Responses						REMARK
	Guidance and counselling services needed for minimizing the challenges of the pre-school in ECE include:	SA	A	D	SD	X	SD	
25.	Child guidance services for acquiring relationship skills such as skills for getting along, corporate or share with others	9 (36)	3 (9)	1 (2)	4 (4)	3.0	0.02	Agree
26.	Child guidance through self-regulation such as how to control negative impulses, resist temptation from strangers etc	10 (40)	4 (12)	2 (4)	1 (1)	3.4	0.1	Agree
27.	Child guidance service involving constructing meaning through developmentally appropriate	12 (48)	4 (12)	1 (2)	0 (0)	3.6	o.1	Agree

	activities such as use of games, songs, rhymes etc							
28.	Child guidance services that inculcate how to delay gratification using modeling techniques, drama, role play etc	13 (52)	2 (4)	2 (4)	0 (0)	3.6	0.11	Agree
29.	Counselling that focuses on organizing teachers' fora on how best to handle the children's problems	9 (36)	6 (18)	1 (2)	0 (0)	3.3	0.02	Agree
30.	Counselling that involves organizing parents' fora on how best to teach their children to dis-allow any body touching their bodies etc	7 (28)	3 (9)	1 (2)	5 (5)	2.59	0.1	Agree

Data on table 4 show that each of the items has mean score higher than the cut-off mean of 2.50 with standard deviation of 0.1 to 0.02, showing sameness in opinion. This indicates that items 25 to 30 are the forms of guidance and counselling services that could help to minimize the challenges in ECE.

Hypothesis Testing: The hypothesis generated in the study was tested using t-test at 0.05 level of significance.

$H0_1$: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of pre-school teachers on the guidance approach for minimizing the challenges of the pre-school in ECE in Umuahia Metropolis (P<0.05).

Table 5: t-test analysis of the responses of the teachers

Group	N	X	SD	Df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Teacher 1	7	36.4	0.16	15	0.129	1.964	Ho not rejected
Teacher 2-3	10	32.5	0.21				

Data on table 4 show that the t-calculated value of 0.129 is less than the t-table value of 1.964. Thus, the null hypothesis is not rejected meaning that there is no significant difference between the teachers' opinion on the appropriate guidance services for minimizing the emotional and social challenges of the pre-school in ECE.

Discussion

The findings revealed that anti-social characteristics of children pose challenges to the pre-school in ECE. This is possible because learners' improper relationships with things, situation and people could negatively influence progress towards their learning. This finding supports the assertion by Ajidahun (2018) who asserted that at any level of children's relational pattern, the child encounters some difficulties. It collaborates with the earlier findings of Kagan (2012) that the way children follow strangers who offer them baits (sweet, biscuits etc), move around the school environment expose them to insecurity, kidnaping and harm respectively.

The finding that emotional traits of children pose psychological challenges to the pre-school has not a far-fetched reason because at childhood stage of human development, it is not common for a child to have adequate voluntary internal control of his behaviours.

This finding agrees with VOS and Baumeister (2014) who related that nursery children lack full knowledge of understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and that it is only when they are given guidance through self-regulation that they can learn a bit of how to control their impulses, resist temptation, delay gratification, calm themselves down when upset etc.

Another finding of the study that neglect, abuse, harm, emotional maltreatment of all sorts etc are among the challenges of the pre-school in ECE is expected in view of the perception of nursery school teachers on the psychosocial features of the children accompanied by the challenges. It again supports Ajdahun (2018) who listed Neglect, abuse, kidnapping etc as problems children in ECE settings must contend with.

Another finding that child guidance approach/services could help minimize the challenges posed by the psychosocial characteristics of children in ECE is in line with Gartrell (2017), who posited that child guidance approach through self-regulation, modeling, utilizing drama and others could go a long way to cater for the emotional and social needs of the pre-school, that could in turn help to minimize many of the challenges. All these could be the reasons why the result of hypothesis tested showed no significant difference in the perception of nursery school teachers on the child guidance services for helping to remedy the children's situations posing challenges in ECE in Umuahia metropolis.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the anti-social and emotional traits of children constitute the psychosocial characteristics of the pre-school that pose challenges in early childhood education. The challenges include neglect, emotional maltreatment, abuse proness to kidnapping, among others. Child guidance services are required in the ECE settings to cater for the emotional and social needs of the pre-school and to avoid problems at their formative years.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Child guidance counsellors should be recruited to early childhood education to see to the emotional and social needs of the pre-school.
2. The responsibilities of the counsllors in ECE settings should be more to identify the children that have challenges such as abuse, emotional maltreatment, phobia etc and organize teachers' fora to help pre-school teachers learn and understand the need for positive ways of handling children's difficulties due to their psychosocial characteristics.
3. The counsellors should organize parents' fora to give the parents of pre-school some training in the basic caregiving skills, learning how to meet the physical and emotional needs of their children.
4. Teachers, parents and counsellors must work as a team to help achieve success in ECE in Umuahia and Abia state as a whole.

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