

ENHANCING LEARNING BY CONNECTING THEORY TO PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *Early childhood educators desire their children not only to learn theory and understand why theories are important but also to learn how to apply the theoretical frameworks in practice. However, many times enhancing learning by children could be compromised due to a potential disconnect between theory and practice. This is because teaching children is a difficult task especially at this young age. It takes effort, dedication and creativity of teachers or instructors to relate the abstract and boring theories to practice. Unfortunately, many practitioners don't know how to provide experiences that will teach children to apply their knowledge independently outside of the classroom when learning new skills. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine teaching and practices in early childhood education as well as enhancing learning by connecting theory to practice. The paper also reveals some challenges and effective approaches for connecting theory to practice and for proper implementation of early childhood education program in Nigeria. It concludes among others that training and re-training of instructors or teachers be made a vital part of education process for ensuring effective connection of theory to practice in this field of education.*

Key Words: *Early childhood, Teacher, Learning, Connecting, Theory and Practice.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

It is a well known fact that teacher education courses cover all necessary theoretical knowledge; but, do not provide enough opportunities to put the theory into practice (Wrenn and Wrenn, 2009). The “apparent chasm between what often happens in university-based teacher education and teaching in schools - a theory - practice gap - has caused some jurisdictions to shift much of their teacher training efforts out of academia and into the field” (Bencze, Hewitt and Pedretti, 2001).

Teacher education programs are pursuing to reducing the gap between the theory and practice of teaching. Preparing teachers for future requires offering opportunities to pre-service teachers for gaining knowledge and experience in the field (Bransford, Darling-Hammond and LePage, 2005). Also, teachers need to apply their knowledge and experience into different situations while making decisions in classroom. Teachers make countless decisions every day (Kohler, Henning and Usma-Wilches, 2008).

Every child and every situation are unique and require the teacher's careful consideration (Sulaiman, Baki, and Rahman, 2011). Teachers are usually alone when making decisions in class and need to take immediate action. While some of the decisions are relatively easy to make for an experienced teacher, but some of them are hard to make for most teachers. They need to analyze the situation, identify the problem, scrutinize the knowledge they accumulated, find a viable solution strategy and adopt it. Hence, finding best solutions for problematic situations involve integrating theory and practice (Korthagen *et al.*, 2001).

Early childhood education programs are not exception in the field (Stacey, 2009). In search of an effective strategy to help teachers connect theory and practice, the following researchers found that case-based pedagogy is one of the effective approaches to put theory into practice (Bencze, Hewitt, and Pedretti, 2001; Schrader *et al.*, 2003).

2. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:

The foundation of education of the child is the pre-schools education which forms an integral part of his or her early education which may be formal or informal, which is given in an educational institution to children aged 1 to 5+ prior to their entering the primary school (Nakpodia, 2011). This educational level of the child provides for the physical, motor, health, nutritional, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional and social development of the pre-school child. If child education can provide these vital necessities which are fundamental in human life, it is not therefore unlikely to have an important and strong relationship with the pupils' performance at the primary school level and perhaps at the secondary and tertiary levels (Nakpodia, 2003; Ibhaze, 2016).

Maduwesi (1999) refers to early childhood care education as the education offered to children who have not yet reached the statutory age of beginning primary school. He further maintained that it is a semi-formal education arrangement, usually outside home where by young children from about the age of 3 years are exposed through play like activities in a group setting through mental, social and physical learning suited to their developmental stages, until the mandatory age of government approved formal schooling. However, there is a growing demand for better ways of

caring for children through an early childhood care project given the advancement in science and technology which now ensures the survival of many more children, thereby increasing population growth.

Unfortunately, early childhood education teachers have many problems in transferring theoretical knowledge into practice. That's why teacher educators seek ways for connecting theory to practice in their pre-service teacher education programs. In addition to this problem, universities are often criticized for implementing teacher education programs disconnected from any real practice (Beck and Kosnik, 2002; Fraser, 2007). In fact, teacher education programs that link theoretical courses to field experiences are more effective than those which don't do this (National Academy of Education, 2005). Suggestively, connecting theory to practice should be encouraged for effective childhood education in Nigeria.

3. Teaching and Practices in Early Childhood Education:

One way to enhance learning in early childhood education is by the integration of teaching and practice of the instructor/teacher. Dewey (1974) expressed the belief that content knowledge should not be remote from the practical issues that teachers face. He believed that teachers' practical knowledge could serve as a valuable resource for enhancing educational theory. A study by Kramer, Polifroni and Organek (1986) as cited in Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) showed that students taught by a practicing faculty member scored higher on professional characteristics (including autonomy, self-concept, and self-esteem) than did students taught by non-practicing faculty. In line with this, Good and Schubert (2001) revealed that practicing faculty can enhance the teaching of early childhood education for the following reasons:

- Teaching in early childhood education becomes grounded in practice;
- The instructor in this field has credibility through maintaining active client contact;
- The early childhood education instructor is able to relate theory to practice effectively;
- Positive role modeling can occur (for example, the use of critical thinking);
- The instructor has opportunities for updating course content based on practice experiences and exposure to new challenges.

Generally, we make the assumption that teaching leads to learning, but it is the experiences that teaching helps create that prompt learning (Boud *et al.*, 1993). When a teacher uses an example from his or her own experience, learning can occur and can stimulate a desire for further learning (Boud *et al.*, 1993).

4. Integrating Theory and Practice in Early Childhood Education:

Although experience may be the foundation of learning, it does not automatically or even necessarily always lead to it (Boud *et al.*, 1993). Using an effective approach in active learning environment can enhance the integration of practice and theory in the classroom. Similarly, using instructional activities involving children doing things and thinking about what they are doing can enhance the integration of practice and theory in the classroom.

In practical teaching:

- Children are involved in more than listening;
- Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on development of students' skills;
- Children are involved in higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation);
- Children are engaged in activities (such as writing, reading, discussing, and observing);
- Greater emphasis is placed on children exploration of their attitudes and values. (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

These components involve activities that allow children to clarify, question, consolidate, and appropriate new knowledge (Meyers and Jones, 1993). An active learning environment should promote children interest in the subject and encourage their participation. This is because we want our children to sense that we are enthusiastic about our teaching and confident in their learning abilities. With this, children can quickly determine if a teacher respects their contributions in class, or even wants contributions at all. Both are critical in creating an active learning environment (Meyers and Jones, 1993).

5. Challenges for Instructors/Teachers of Early Childhood Education

These challenges according to Wang (2012) and Unver (2014) include:

a) Course contents:

One of the challenges an instructor or a teacher of early childhood education face is that the content of the course is abstract and theoretical, which makes it more difficult for children to learn. Teachers find it difficult to match the theoretical contents to practical's teaching. The content of early childhood education could be perceived by teachers as abstract and theoretical.

b) Instructors' overlook of making connections between theory and practice:

In general, an instructor has received a great training in the area of his/her expertise and the instructor could easily overlook the importance of making extra efforts to connect theory to practice for children learning in the

classroom. Instructors may introduce the theories and the relevant course material, and finally test children understanding of the learned concepts. Thus, easily integrating the learned theories to practice becomes the second priority.

c) Some early childhood education textbooks are too theoretical and lack practical examples:

Although, early childhood education is required in the general field of education, the availability of textbooks on this type of education is limited compared to many other disciplines in education. Although most authors have done excellently by introducing the concepts and theories logically and systemically, instructors or teachers in general find difficulty of making the connections between theory and practice by reading the textbooks.

6. Strategies for Connecting Theory to Practice in Early Childhood Education:

6.1 Use practical examples to connect theory to practice in classroom

Once instructors have taught the theory of childhood learning, they could use practical examples to illustrate how the theory can be utilized in real-world situations for children.

6.2 Use group projects and homework to help children digest the theoretical concepts

After the concepts or theories of childhood learning have been taught, children still may not understand the material covered because of the gap between the theory and practice. So it is truly beneficial to assign group projects that are hands-on and practical.

6.3 Instructors make conscious efforts to connect theory to practice in classroom

Even though many childhood learning theories could be abstract and boring, instructors should make a conscious effort for connecting theory to practice for effective teaching. If this is done, children will feel that the theories they learn are useful for their future professions and their motivation to learn will be consistently enhanced.

6.4 Use illustrations or diagrams to make easy for children to understand concepts

There is an old saying: “a picture is worth a thousand words.” In order to simplify complex concepts and highlight the important key principles, the instructor could develop graphic illustrations or diagrams to provide children with easy-to-understand information about the theory or concept.

7. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, teaching childhood education is a difficult task. Effective teaching effectively at the level of children at this very young age is a great challenge; it takes effort, dedication, and creativity to relate the abstract and boring theories to practice. However, the importance of a solid foundation in education is obvious. Early childhood education is where the foundation is laid. Poor performance in the other levels of academic can be traced to this foundation level. So a thorough knowledge of what, and how education is been handled at this level is imperative. It is a worthwhile step in the right direction for the Nigerian government to have agreed to have full participation in the education of early childhood education.

Similarly, enhancing learning by connecting theory to practice in childhood education is in the right direction for effective teaching and learning. We want our children to sense that we are enthusiastic about our teaching and confident in their learning abilities. With this children can quickly determine if a teacher respects their contributions in class, or even wants contributions at all. All Nigerian children deserve the best, and education is the only legacy that can be given to set them on the road to optimal development. To ensure an effective connection of theory to practice in early childhood education in Nigeria, training and retraining of instructors/teachers should be made a vital part of the education process. With a theory dominated text books in this field, an instructor should make a conscious effort to connect the theory to practice so that children motivation of learning could be enhanced. By the time these children graduate from pre-school, they can apply the learned concepts in the classroom to practical settings. As a result, the children competence of teaching or coaching in the future will be significantly enhanced as well.

8. THE WAY FORWARD:

- Teacher educators have the ability to connect theory and practice in early childhood teacher education programs. They should analyze their needs, understand their facilities, and formulate their goals and objectives. As a result, the structure and the early childhood education programs can be improved in terms of connecting theory to practice in Nigeria.
- More so, it is important for teachers or instructors in this field to create an enabling environment that allows connecting theories to practical's teaching. This environment includes:
 - a) Being strongly interested in children as individuals;
 - b) Acknowledging children feelings about an assignment or other pertinent items;
 - c) Encouraging children to ask questions;
 - d) Communicating both openly and subtly that each person's learning is important;
 - e) Encouraging children to be creative and independent and form their own views.

- It is a widely accepted fact that one important component of practical teaching that distinguishes it from theoretical teaching is an emphasis on experience rather than merely listening as a means of acquiring knowledge. Experience is indispensable for learning to occur. Experience cannot be by passed; it is the central consideration of all learning including childhood education. Only experienced instructors or teachers should be involved in the program.
- There is need for instructors/teachers to create effective activities for connecting theory and practice in early childhood education through proper lesson plans, rehearsing instructional activities in a small group, self-assessment and collaboration of learning through sharing experiences like presentations, class discussions, and small-group discussions on the topic “Early Childhood Education”.

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