PROPRIETORS' AWARENESS AND COMPLIANCE WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION NATIONAL MINIMUM STANDARDS AND PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN LEARNING OUTCOMES IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examined the level of awareness of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for early childhood education by pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria and determine the extent of their compliance with it. It also determined the relationship between the extent of compliance with the NMS and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in the Region. Sixty head teachers, 120 Nursery II Class Teachers and one class of 4-5 year old children and their parents were selected from 60 nursery schools in the Region using multi-stage sampling techniques. A semi-structured interview guide which was used to measure awareness and compliance with the NMS. A Pre-primary Readiness Inventory (PRI) was used to measure social competence, acceptable behaviour, language development, early literacy and numeracy as index learning outcomes of the selected pre-primary school aged children. Results obtained showed that proportion of pre-primary schools operators that owned a copy of the national

minimum standards for pre-primary education in Southwestern Nigeria was quite low and hence there was low level of its awareness; but paradoxically there was an average complied with the required qualities. The results also showed that the relationship of compliance with the national minimum standards and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria was significantly low. The study concluded that since the level of awareness and compliance with the NMS was low, much may not be derived in terms production of children with stronger language, academic and social skills unless there are serious and calculated efforts to make the NMS handy in schools and a strict enforcement is embarked upon by the concerned education authority in the Region.

Introduction

Education of pre-primary school aged children (0-5) in Nigeria was once regarded as a family responsibility, where young children were looked after by various members of the immediate and extended family. Early childhood education at that time was geared towards guaranteeing the child's physical well-being, promoting the child's psycho-social well-being, supporting the child's physical development, promoting the child's mental development and facilitating the child's interaction with others outside the home (Evans & Myers, 1993). However, lifestyles changed and mothers who were the primary caregivers of young children began to join the workforce away from home. As the traditional practices of childcare changed, there grew a need for child care outside the home (Agusiobo, 2003). This need led to the development of day-care centres, popularly known as otakara or jelesinmi, where children were cared for while their parents worked. During this time, it was believed that all young children required was to be kept healthy and well nourished while their mothers worked. The general view held at that time was that formal learning would begin after children attained the compulsory school age of six years.

As more mothers joined the workforce, the demand for day-care facilities increased and various forms of organised pre-primary

school education facilities developed. Most took the form of commercial fee paying institutions and belonged to either private individuals, corporate bodies or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Akinware & Ojomo, 1993). Initially, owners of such institutions were at liberty to run them whichever way they deemed fit. In certain instances, this was often under very low standards: being that there were no strict government guidelines or regulations. Ejieh (2006) describes how this situation led to a spurious proliferation of pre-primary schools of varying degrees of low quality across the nation and also raises questions of what young children are actually offered in the name of pre-primary education. Answers to questions raised about the quality of pre-primary education and care offered to young children became pertinent when evidence from research provided convincing evidence that the first 5 years of an individual's life are the most important. Research in neuroscience (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) provided evidence that showed that 90% of the human brain is developed during this time. The research also demonstrated that high quality early childhood experiences are very important for later school success. Other studies conducted after Shonkoff and Philips' (Early, Maxwell, Kelly & Burchinal, 2008; NICHD Early Childhood Care Research Network, 2005; Peiner-Feinberg, 2000) investigated Shonkoff and Philips' claims and found them to be true.

Further, while many Nigerian traditional childrearing practices, patterns and beliefs were recognised as being consistent with current scientific understanding of children's growth and development (Myers, 1993), lifestyles have however changed, as people have adopted foreign ways of life and abandoned traditional cultures. This break from traditional practices unfortunately often occurred without a strong understanding of the new beliefs and practices. These circumstances more often than not left early childhood education and care in a dilemma. The bane of this dilemma laid in the indecisiveness of the provisions of successive National Policies of Education (1977, 1981 & 2004). Each policy recognised that pre-primary education had a role in the educational system, but none provided effective plans for pre-primary education the way other levels of education were provided for. Successive policies simply

recommended that pre-primary education and care should be provided by private individuals, corporate groups and NGOs; hence school owners popularly called proprietors/ proprietresses were at liberty to organise and provide their pre-primary school education as they deemed fit, often with little or no monitoring or supervision from the government (Sooter, 2013).

The proliferation of pre-primary school education in Nigeria spread so far and wide and that by 2004 more than 57% of pre-primary schools lay within the realm of the private sector and were operated without the guidance of effective regulatory measures. As a result, young children at the most crucial stage of their development were exposed to questionable qualities of pre-primary school education. In an attempt to improve the situation of pre-primary education and care in Nigeria in 2005, the Universal Basic Education Policy made provisions for pre-primary classes to be introduced in all public primary schools. The policy set out to ensure that every Nigerian child had the opportunity to the best quality early childhood care and education possible. Two years after this (2007), the Integrated Early Childhood Policy (IECD) was also released.

This policy is multi-sectored and aims at catering for all the development domains - education, health, nutrition and also the child protection sectors. To effectively implement the policy, it was accompanied by the National Minimum Standards for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria. The goals of the National Minimum Standards include a provision of care and support for the child in the form of good nutrition and health, a safe environment, psycho-social stimulation, protection and security. The standards also seek to inculcate in the child a spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, playing with toys and other instructional aids. An important goal of the standards is geared towards effecting a smooth transition for children from the home to school, while at the same time providing children with adequate care and supervision while their parents are at work.

The Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy and the National Minimum Standards could be considered as positive development in the provision of pre-primary school education. It is believed that with the new Minimum Standards, which spells out required

Distal features of a nursery school (the qualities that are potentially available to children but are not the children's actual experiences; examples are: adult-child ratio, group size, staff training, education and experience, wages, working conditions and staff stability) and the proximal features which are the sensitive and responsive interactions and relationships between staff and children (examples are the learning climate, the quality of instruction, coherence of lessons, and standards of learning provided by teacher quality), all proprietors of pre-primary schools will make the standards their own minimum standards and in fact operate well above the stated specifications.

All the above are of extreme importance, because previous research have demonstrated that high-quality pre-school experiences produce stronger cognitive and academic skills at entry into primary school; and these in turn leading to better adolescent and adult outcomes (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Nores, Belfeild & Barnett, 2013). In each of these studies, children who attended high quality pre-primary schools were observed to start primary school with stronger language, academic and social skills. These were therefore the indications that such schools are complying with the national standards for pre-primary education in their respective locations.

Unfortunately, the schools under such studies as reported above were outside Nigeria: leaving one to want to investigate what actually operates in Nigeria, a multi-ethnic country with people of varying profiles in terms of interest and access to western education. The level of awareness of proprietors (operators) of pre-primary schools and compliance with the available national minimum standard in Nigeria are therefore in doubt and the extent to which the children in compliant schools are faring academically have required investigation in an educationally advantaged Southwestern Region of Nigeria, hence the need for this study.

Objectives of this Paper

Given the extent to which the people of the Southwestern Region of Nigeria embraced western education and recognition given to pre-primary education, otherwise called the nursery school, there is the

need to investigate the extent to which they welcome the National Minimum Standards which have been designed and which was purportedly made available to the public towards providing children with quality pre-primary education. It is also necessary to find out how well they are actually being implemented. The following are therefore the specific objectives of the paper:

i.   To examine the level of awareness of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for early childhood education by pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria;

ii.   Determine the extent of the school operators compliance with NMS; and

iii.   Determine the relationship between the extent of compliance with the NMS and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in the Region.

Research Questions

Based on the objectives above, this paper has provided relevant answers to the following questions:

i.   To what extent are pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria aware of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for early childhood education in Nigeria?

ii.   To what extent have pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria complied with the NMS for early childhood education in Nigeria?; and

iii.   Is there a significant relationship between the extent of compliance with the NMS and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria?

Method

This study adopted the survey research design. Pre-primary schools, head teachers, teachers, children and their parents in Southwestern Nigeria constituted the population for the study. The sample which comprised 60 head teachers, 120 Nursery II Class Teachers and one class of 4-5 year old children and their parents were selected using multi-stage sampling techniques. In the first stage, three states were selected from the region using simple random sampling technique.

In the second stage, a total of 20 schools with a period of existence beyond 10 years and are on purpose-built or modified structures were purposively selected in each of the three states making a total of 60 schools altogether. Using simple random sampling technique, an intact class of Nursery II children and their class teachers/caregivers were selected in each school. The head teacher of each school was also involved in the study. Three instruments were used to collect data for the study. The first instrument namely, Distal Quality Assessment Guide (DQAG) was a semi-structured interview guide which was used to measure awareness, compliance, approach and challenges to implementation of the Minimum National Standards. The second instrument, the Proximal Quality Appraisal Checklist (PQAC) was an observation checklist which was used to appraise adult-child ratio, class size, learning climate, quality of instruction, availability of materials, class management, teacher child interaction and discipline strategies. The third instrument, Pre-primary Readiness Inventory (PRI) was used to determine children's learning outcomes in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (social competence, acceptable behaviour, language development, early literacy and numeracy) that pre-primary school aged children were assumed to have acquired before proceeding to primary school. The PRI was made up of two parts. Part A was an observation inventory which measured affective and psychomotor skills and Part B which assessed cognitive learning outcomes through the use of picture identification, crayon colouring, number recognition and basic sequences. The data collected were analysed following percentages and linear regression statistical procedures outlined by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results
Results obtained are hereby presented according to each of the research questions posed.

Research Question 1.
What is the level of awareness of the National Minimum Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care by pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria?
Answer to this question is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Level of awareness of the National Minimum Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care by pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Comulative Percent
Has a Copy of the NMS	9	15.0	15.0
Does not Have a Copy of the NMS	51	85.0	100.0
Total	60	100.0	

To determine the level of awareness of the National Minimum Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care from the participants of the study as presented Table 1, the total number of pre-primary schools that owned a copy of the standards was taken, and hence found to be quite low, as 51 (85%) of the schools sampled had no copy. Only 9 (15%) pre-primary school owners had a copy each, which they claimed to have acquired accidentally, by running into it on the internet while browsing.

Research Question 2.
To what extent have pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria complied with the NMS for early childhood education in Nigeria?

To answer this research question, the two different components (a) distal qualities and (b) proximal qualities of the NMS were isolated from each other in order to determine the extent to which the operators of pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria complied with each of them. By this, two sub-questions (a & b) are raised.

(a) To what extent do pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria comply with the National Minimum Standards in terms of distal qualities?

Using the data collected in respect of distal qualities, the total distal quality scores obtained were summed and deducted from the expected score. From these scores, the mean (ÓX/N) and percentage (ÓX obtained/ ÓX expected) scores were worked out to determine the level of distal compliance. The result obtained is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Extent of compliance with the National Minimum Standards in terms of distal qualities by pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria

Case	N	X	$\overline{X}$	% of Compliance	Remark
Distal Quality Expected Scors	1800	9000	5	53.3	Average Compliance
Distal Quality Obtained Scores	1800	4797	2.67		

Table 2 shows that 53.3% of pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria were compliant with the National Minimum Standards in terms of distal qualities. Out of an expected distal score of 9000, a total score of 4797 was obtained, which also gave a mean score of 2.67 out of 5. All these indicated an average distal compliance.

(b) To what extent do pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria comply with the National Minimum Standards in terms of proximal qualities?
In order to assess the compliance of pre-primary schools with the National Minimum Standards in terms of proximal qualities, data collected in respect of proximal qualities were scored, where "Excellent" was scored 5, "Good" 4, "Average" 3, "Poor" 2 and "Very poor" attracted a score of 1. The resulting scores in each of the cases were pooled together and added up to find the mean scores which constituted a measure of compliance with the National Minimum Standards. The measures obtained are the results presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Extent of pre-primary schools' compliance with the National Minimum Standards in terms of proximal qualities

	N	X	$\overline{X}$	% of Compliance	Remark
Proximal Quality Expected Scores	3420	17100	5	58.3	Average
Proximal Quality Obtained Scores	3420	9982	2.92		Compliance

Table 3 shows that 58.3% of pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria were compliant with the National Minimum Standards. Out of an expected proximal score of 17100, a total score of 9982 was obtained, which gave a mean score of 2.92 out of 5, and also indicated average proximal compliance.

Research Question 3

Is there a significant relationship between the extent of compliance with the minimum proximal and distal qualities and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria?

Results of the regression analysis conducted on this question are presented in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Table 4: Regression analysis comparing the extent of compliance with the minimum national standards and their relationship with pre-primary school children's learning outcomes in Southwestern Nigeria

Coefficients								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std.	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.944	0.55		35.203	.000	1.836	2.053
	DISTAL SCORE	0.49	.014	.070	3.515	.000	.022	.077
	PROXIMAL SCORES	.441	.016	.548	27.652	.000	.410	.572
a.	Dependent Variable: LEARNING OUTCOME SCORES							

Table 5: Regression model summary indicating the combined strength of the relationship of the two independent variables (distal and proximal qualities) on the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria

Model Summary[b]						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.565a	.319	.319	.77908		
a. Predictors: (Constant), PROXIMAL SCORES, DISTAL SCORE b. Dependent Variable. LEARNING OUTCOME SCORES						

Table 6: Multiple regression ANOVA[b] testing the significance of the relationship of compliance with the minimum proximal and distal qualities and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria

AVOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	511.895	2	255.948	421.681	.000[b]
1.	Residual	1090.725	1797	.607		
	Total	1602.620	17999			
a. Dependent Variable: DEVELOPMENTAL SKILLS SCORES						
b. Predictors: (Constant), PROXIMAL SCORES, DISTAL SCORE						

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that the independent variable, 'proximal qualities' had a stronger significant relationship with the overall learning outcomes of pre-primary children in Southwestern Nigeria (â = 0.548, p< 0.05): far above the relationship that the second independent variable, 'distal qualities' had (â = 0.07, p< 0.05). However, when the combined strength of the relationship of the

two independent variables were investigated (Table 5), an adjusted R^2 of 0.319 was obtained. This indicated a very low relationship as suggested that 31.9% of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the two independent variables (proximal and distal qualities). In other words, when the two independent variables are pooled together, they can only have 31% relationship on the dependent variable i.e. academic performance of students. The low extent of the influence notwithstanding, there was the need to test for the significance of the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The result of the multiple regression ANOVA[b] testing (Table 6) of the significance of the relationship of compliance with the minimum proximal and distal qualities with the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria was significantly low ($R^2 = 0.32$; $F^b = 421.68$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

This study has found that the proportion of pre-primary schools that owned a copy of the national minimum standards for pre-primary education in Southwestern Nigeria was quite low. The implications of these findings are that Nigerian government has not taken necessary steps to ensure that the National Minimum Standards are made available to all pre-primary schools. This is in spite of the fact that all pre-primary schools in the sample were duly registered and up-to date with their renewal fees. This also implies that school operators were in contact with the ministry of education and local School Boards' where it would be expected that such documents are circulated from. The lack of awareness of the national Minimum Standards could therefore make any observer to conclude that pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria are yet to meet the required standard in terms of distal and proximal qualities. The finding also buttressed the opinion of Sooter (2013) that although the Nigerian government policy recognised that pre-primary education had a role in the educational system, effective plans for its success were not provided for as were done for other levels of education.

Moreover, the finding that 53.3% of pre-primary schools in Southwestern Nigeria were compliant with the National Minimum Standards in terms of distal qualities also suggests an average distal compliance. This implies that in terms of adult-child ratio, group size, staff training, education and experience, wages, working conditions and staff stability, pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria are not adequately capable; and since they are majorly private individuals and corporate organisations whose major interest is to achieve much with less (profit), it would not be a surprise. However, they appear to be working contrary to observations of Early et al (2006), Olaleye and Omotayo, (2009), and Neuman and Kamil (2010) which attributed the quality of pre-primary school education to the value of the school's distal features. Similarly, pre-primary school operators in Southwestern Nigeria also complied with the required proximal qualities at an average level. This implies that in terms of sensitive and responsive interactions and relationships between staff and children (the learning climate, the quality of instruction, coherence of lessons and standards of learning provided by the teacher, management and discipline strategies employed by the teacher and the selection and array of classroom resources provided for the children across all learning areas), pre-primary school education in Southwestern Nigeria is on the average. This also suggests that pre-primary schools in the Region appear not very much ready to produce learners with stronger cognitive and academic skills at entry into primary school and may in turn not produce better adolescent and adults as earlier suggested by Campbell et al (2002), and Buka and McCormick (2008)

Lastly, the findings which indicated that the relationship of compliance with the minimum proximal and distal qualities and the learning outcomes of pre-primary school children in Southwestern Nigeria was significantly low, may therefore not be a surprise. This is because it is expected that where the two qualities are excellent, learners who attended high quality pre-primary schools will be stronger in language, academic and social skills (Nores et al, 2013) than those who did not. If learners who attended pre-primary schools that defaulted in these two qualities have performed significantly low, then the answer would not be farfetched that their

learning outcome is a product of their schools' poor distal and proximal qualities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study had provided pieces of information that may raise a query as to what extent the Southwestern Nigeria is an educationally advantaged region in Nigeria, given the fact that the distal and proximal qualities of the pre-primary schools thereof were generally poor and hence weak to produce children with stronger language, academic and social skills. This is thus suggesting that the government which provides the minimum national standard for primary schools have to ensure that all pre-primary schools in Nigeria own a copy of the policy. They are also expected to adequately supervise the schools : since the government does not place much premium on attaching pre-primary classes with the public primary schools, and hence has not much burden of supervision on its officials, other than on the private institutions owned by individuals, corporate organisations and NGOs.

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