
Developing Creativity in Early Childhood Education in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Early childhood is characterized as a highly creative period. It is perhaps the most creative phase of human development. Early childhood practitioners can help and encourage children to learn to think and solve problems in creative ways by giving them the freedom to make mistake and respecting their ideas. To solve a problem creatively, children needs to be able to see a variety of perspectives and to generate several solutions. To achieve this, teachers must teach children to examine their surroundings for 'cues' that will help them to generate a pool of possible solutions. Teachers must open their own channel of allowing, accepting, and turning over some control to the children themselves. This paper therefore, discusses, development of early childhood creativity spanning from under 3-6 years age group; fostering creative process in young children; as well as barriers to creativity in early childhood.

Keywords: Early childhood, Creativity, Practitioners.

The demand of early childhood education and programs has continued to increase as more valuable children survive, as family situations and child care practices change, as more woman join the labour force. Early childhood education is concerned with the care and education of children age 0-6 years or just before the age of former schooling (FRN, 2004). The age 0-6 age is perceived as the period of immense opportunity for growth and development. It is the most delightful, yet risky period in the development of the child as experience gained at this stage may make or mar the

child permanently (Oduolowu, 2011). Mahuta (2007) further stated that the aim of early childhood education is to foster the proper development of the children, identify and address their problems, harness their potentials, mould their character, enhance their learning, equip them for life, so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal, communal and global development in all ramifications of life.

The world of the preschooler is one of imagination and magic. For many children, their creativity will reach its peak before the age of six, after which it will begin to decline with the onset of formal schooling and the developmental drive towards conformity. Creativity has been considered in terms of process, product or person (Barron and Harrington, 2010), and has been defined as the interpersonal and intrapersonal process by means of products are developed. In dealing with the young children, creativity develops from their experiences with the process, rather than concern for the finished product. This is because young children may not have developed all the skills they need to achieve a successful creative outcome (Craft, 2010).

Creative development in the early years is mostly through the wider spectrum of creative play. As all developmental learning in the early years are centered within play as a medium for learning, so also the foundation of creativity in children. Play that has value for creativity in children has its own set of defining characteristics which serve to intensify its values with their increasing presence (Wood, 2009). These essential characteristics of valuable play are first and foremost, that it is fun and enjoyable, chosen by the children. It is also essential that it is integrating in nature, involving the minds, bodies, spirits and sense of the children involved.

Brief History of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

In Nigeria, a remarkable achievement was recorded in the history of Nigerian educational system in the year 2004 when the Federal Government started to provide pre-school education for Nigerian children. Prior to that, early childhood education in form of nursery school in Nigeria is largely a post-colonial development. The semblances of it during the colonial era were the kindergarten and infant classes, which consisted of groups of children not yet ready for primary education. As grouping for instruction in schools was not age-based during that period, some children aged six or more, could be found in some of the infant classes (Tor-Anyin, 2008).

At pre-independence, all efforts for provision of early childhood education were confined to the voluntary sector and received little or no support from the government (Tor-Anyin, 2008). It was for the first time in 1977 with the introduction of National policy on education by the military government of Nigeria that the importance and need for early childhood education was given official recognition and linked with the child's educational performances in primary school. Gradually, early childhood institutions stayed, and by 1985, Nigeria had about 4,200 early childhood institutions. While in 1992, the number increased to about 8,300. (FGN/UNICEF, 2003). Though,

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the provision of early childhood education as at that time was left in the hand of private individuals, organizations and institutions. Today, early childhood education sections are existing in nearly every public primary school in Nigeria. This represented an important turnaround in the history of basic education in the country. This recognition accorded to preschool education might not be unconnected to the realization of the benefits associated with the level of education. Oduolowu (2010) submits that attending a well established preschool education is the only opportunity a child has to gain a holistic development.

Development of Early Childhood Creativity through Free Play

Creativity is developed in the early years through the wider spectrum of play. As all developmental learning in the early years is centered within play as a medium for learning, here too lie the foundations of creative development (Wood, 2009).

The element of pretend” is central to early creative development through play. The children weave easily between real and pretend worlds, real and pretend situations and real and pretend actions with real and pretend items that have real and pretend consequences (Mathews, 2010). They make symbolic transformations easily and freely. This process involves image making and image transformation, inherently creative skills. These skills according to Mathews, (2010) are also naturally and inherently present in young children and utilized by them daily in their urge towards play that enhances their learning. Learning gives satisfaction and a measure of how successful a play session has been from a learning point of view, is how satisfied the child is by the play experience. This personal motivation gained through truly successful play is both stimulating and exciting for the child as they learn and learn and learn.

It is for this reason that free play is the essence of early learning and that the freer the play, the richer the learning outcomes for the child (Broadhead, 2009). This is especially true in relation to learning that stimulates creative development in children. Playfulness and an exploratory drive are ignited through being free to play. Self confidence and self discipline comes through self-directed free play (Gardner, 2009). The abilities to take risks and exercise judgment, and creative performances have their roots in early risky play (Ball and Sandester, 2010). Even knowledge acquisition skills are laid down through a love of learning developed in early childhood through an internalization of the fun that learning can bring and a lifelong sense of joy through learning by association (Gardner, 2009). Reflection, the essence of critical and analytical skills can only come through experience of self-initiated experimental creative learning.

Play and Creativity Development in the Age group of less than 3 years.

What distinguished early creative developmental learning from other types of play is the child’s freedom to choose and control their activities without undue interference from adults (Broad head, 2010). Obviously, this can pose questions for

early year's practitioners about their role and what type and level of impute they should be making in order to maximize the learning opportunities for the children. According to Craft, (2010), there are three main functions that the practitioner needs to fulfill to achieve this:

❖ They must adopt a pro-active and thoughtful approach to providing the best play environment and materials. This includes not only an understanding of what a creatively stimulating environment is but also a commitment to the principle that a good toy is 10% toy and 90% child.

❖ Secondly, a good practitioner must also adopt a principle of attentiveness to the children through both an awareness of their development gained through observation and reflection as well as an openness and willingness to being responsive to children's agenda and interest. Inappropriate interventions merely interrupt the children's flow. A supportive practitioner understands the magical and transformational power of play and has respect for the directions the children lead themselves in.

❖ Thirdly, the practitioner must respect the child's choices under pinned by an understanding of and commitment to children's wisdom in relation to their learning needs.

While a balance of play activities is necessary for holistic child development and learning, the more present the will of the child is within a play activity then the better it is for many types of development, particularly creative development (Broadhead, 2010). Free play where the will of the child is paramount is the most effective play for creative development. Making choices, making mistakes, reflecting, taking risks, being explorative, curious and playful are all distinct features of both free play and creative development. Free play also increases children's communication and negotiation skills which have a direct impact on their developing key elements of transformational creativity in adulthood. It appears therefore that the less rigid the learning approach in the early years, the higher the opportunities for creative development. Wood, (2009) argues for an integrated pedagogical model where the practitioner aims to create a balanced and combinational curriculum for under 3's where a mixture of child and practitioner initiated and responded activities are carefully blended to maximize children's learning. Wood identifies four main types of interact:

- The first is child initiated and child directed play. This is where all activities are freely chosen and can lead in any given direction. The children engage, collaborate, plan, build on previous themes or start new projects, choose their play mates and the resources as well as the location for the play (indoors, outdoors).

- The second type is child initiated and adult responsive activities where the children initiate the activity, the adult observes and reflects in order to meaningful respond to their prompts or request involvement.

- The third types is adult initiated and child responsive activities where the adult structures and direct activities with learning goals in kind. This type of play comes with

built in flexibility to develop the activities in accordance with children's responses and the play can lead in unplanned directions.

- The fourth type is adult initiated and directed play. This is where the activity is linked to specific learning outcomes. While every effort to ensure that the play remain fun for the children, they have little choices or freedom within these structures as the adult retains control all the time.

While the fourth type of play is common in most early year's educational settings in Nigeria, the first three types of play hold the most potent learning potentials for young children's creative development as well as the emotional and social developmental learning which underpin creativity. The greater the degree of freedom, the richer the creative growth.

Creative Development in the age group of 3-6years

The centrality of freedom and free play is just as important within this age group. However, as this age is so much more communicative and sociable, they often and are appreciative of teacher involvement. In addition, these age groups are required to develop certain school readiness skills which form much of the teacher agenda as prescribed by various national policy and curricular frame work. The balance between the child's natural development needs and educational specific developmental needs are finely balanced within positive examples of educational settings of this age group (Humphries and Rowe 2010). While structure can progress development for this age group, this structure still needs to be balanced with their input and freedom to input as well as punctuated by opportunities for pure and varied free play.

The innateness of children's creativity was demonstrated through the figurative and verbal tests devised by Torrance (1970). These show that preschool children aged 3-5 demonstrate more spontaneous creativity than those aged 6 and upwards. If this magical age of creativity found between the ages of 3-5 is to be maintain and developed rather than stifled then great care is needed during the pre-school years to add value to its evolving process. The age 3-6 are most often the preschool years in much of the developed world including Nigeria. Many creativity theorists that wrote on this age contribute to an evolving agreement on the following four main principles for supporting creativity development during these crucial years:

❖ The first echoes what is previously discussed in relation to free play. It is that children must be both free to make choices within their play and be supported in these choices by the teacher, the environment and the methods.

❖ The second is that fun, pleasure and enjoyment are essential ingredients in any activity if valuable and positive creative development is to occur, this will also foster a love of learning which will contribute in later developmental stages to knowledge acquisition and creativity.

❖ The third is that learning at this age needs to integrate the senses and the intelligence within this phase of learning. Engaging the senses of vision, aroma, taste,

sound and touch and integrating them through play activities will result in greater creative awareness and development.

❖ The fourth principle is the incorporation of an element of risk into children's play activities (Ball & Sandester 2009). That risky play aids the development of a significant number of creative traits. It contributes to an evolving ability not only to take risks but to exercise good judgment within risk taking.

Play incorporating the senses is vital at this age. Children's cognitive development and brain activity is mostly sensually stimulated through smell, touch, taste, sound and sight. Activity experienced through the senses internalizes the learning within the child so that it is remembered on a deep level throughout the body as well as the brain. This integration allows them to process learning in a much more meaningful and profound way than non-sensory related learning (Humphries and Rowe, 2010). This allows for strong creative foundations upon which knowledge and skills can be built. In this way, it is the role of a creatively stimulating curriculum aimed at 3-6 age groups, to meet learning needs of the children across the five senses. The guiding philosophy for a pro-creativity educator within this age group is freedom, fun, risk and sensory integration. Supporting this philosophy within the classroom will result in happy children. Happiness is the central milestone for engagement in childhood. When children's developmental needs are being met, happiness is the most visible result. Creating the amiable classroom is the kingpin of creative development.

Other Processes of Fostering Creativity in Early Childhood

Creativity in young children can be fostered and encouraged by providing the following according to (Craft, 2009).

Choices: Children who are given choices show more creativity than do children who have all choices made for them. Adapt to children's ideas rather than trying to structure the children's ideas to fit the adult.

Stimulation: Physical environments designed to stimulate the senses can enhance creative problem solving. Provide a classroom environment that allows children to explore and play without undue restraints.

Time for play and fantasy: Dramatic play just prior to engaging in problem-solving tasks can lead to more creative thoughts.

Independence: (with reasonable limits) – Allow children the freedom to explore all possibilities, moving from popular to more original ideas. Think and act freely, yet within the limits of rules.

Brainstorming Sessions: Encourage children to tackle problems as a group by freely expressing their ideas with no fear of a negative response. Brainstorming can take place between a child and adult or between two or more children.

Encouragement: When children show special aptitudes, such as an ability to generate many questions, a keen memory, advanced reading or pre-reading skills, artistic skills, etc. Teachers should encourage them to build on it and expand their skills.

Honest Critiques: Evaluate children's work constructively so that they can see ways to improve on their work and still feel positive about themselves and what they have created. Emphasize process rather than product.

Barriers to Creativity in Early Childhood

❖ **Surveillance:** Being observed by others while engaged in a creative process can undermine the creativity of a process (Craft, 2009). It is important to note that children are sensitive to being watched by adults. Children pause in their activities when they become aware of being watched. When a teacher wants to observe a child's activity, he/she should maintain distance between her and the child to avoid reducing his/her level of interaction with others.

❖ **Rewards:** rewards or incentives for children appear to interfere with the creative process. Rewards seem to reduce the quality of children's responses and the flexibility of their thought. In other words, rewards reduce children's ability to shift from category to category in their responses (Wood, 2009). That indeed, any external constraints reduce flexibility. Research suggests that children who appear to be creative are often involved in imaginative play, and are motivated by internal factors rather than external factors such as rewards and incentives.

❖ **Freedom:** Two most powerful inhibitors to creativity during childhood are premature attempts to eliminate fantasy and operations that prevent children from learning more than they are ready to learn. Wood (2009) explains that some road blocks to encouraging creativity can be highly structured materials and instructions. It is important that children be given the freedom to express divergent thought and to find more than one route to solutions.

❖ **Expected External Evaluation:** Knowing beforehand that an activity is going to be graded, can lead to a decrease in creativity.

Conclusion

It is obvious that solid foundation is important; and early childhood education is where the foundation is laid. Failure or poor performance in other levels of academic can be traced to this foundation level. Creativity is both a skill set and a unique and individual personality structure that is developed throughout childhood and fine-tuned in adolescence and adulthood. Early childhood education has a key role to play in its development. Positive creativity inspiring experiences at every stage of the educational journey are needed. This is especially true in both early childhood and the infant primary classes. Educators who rise to the creativity challenge will be well rewarded in rich teaching experiences and the joy of seeing children reach their potential in supportive and integrated learning systems.

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