Choosing the Best School for Your Child:
Criteria for Selecting an Effective Early Childhood Program

Katrina A. Korb
University of Jos

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Abstract

With the current proliferation of early childhood programs in Nigerian urban centres, parents can be overwhelmed in identifying the best program for their child. The purpose of this paper is to propose criteria that parents can use to select an effective early childhood program. This paper outlines six criteria that indicate a high quality early childhood program: educational philosophy of holistic development, high quality teachers, developmentally appropriate content, exploratory and playful learning activities, storybooks as the primary learning material, and low teacher-to-child ratio. Parents are recommended to investigate early childhood programs about six months before they enroll their child by collecting electronic or printed informational resources on the program, interviewing a school administrator, and/or observing the classrooms of the centre. Early childhood program administrators are recommended to evaluate their programs based on these criteria and make improvements where necessary in order to attract children to their programs.

Introduction

The number of early childhood education centres is rapidly increasing in Nigeria, primarily due to a high demand by parents (Sooter, 2013). Parents seeking to enroll their child in early childhood programs can be overwhelmed by the number and variety of programs that are available. Indeed, there is considerable variability in the quality of education and care provided by early childhood programs in Nigeria (Urwick, 2002). Some early childhood programs provide an excellent foundation for children's future learning and success. However, low quality early childhood programs can actually hinder young children's development. The National Association for the Education of Young Children even goes so far as to say that "poor-quality programs may place children's development, even their health and safety, at risk" (1995, p. 2). It extremely important that parents select a high-quality program for their young child.

There are many factors that parents should consider when choosing an appropriate early childhood program, including the cost and location of the centre. Because of the impact of the quality of the program on a child's development, quality should be the most important factor that influences parents' choice. However, parents tend to be unable to recognize good quality early childhood programs (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2014). Therefore, criteria for identifying a high quality early childhood program should be clearly articulated to assist parents in selecting a program that will positively influence the development of their children.

The purpose of this paper is to describe research-based criteria of effective early childhood programs. Six criteria of a high quality program are identified. First, high quality early childhood programs have the goal to nurture holistic development, including cognitive, physical, social, character, and spiritual development. The second criteria of is high quality teachers, particularly teachers who have warm, responsive relationships with each child. Thirdly, the content of instruction should be developmentally appropriate, meaning that children are not being forced to learn content that is too advanced for their still-developing thinking abilities. The fourth criteria is that very little direct instruction should be used, but instead children should participate in playful and exploratory learning activities. Fifthly, the most important learning material for a high quality early childhood program is storybooks (not textbooks), so each school and classroom should have a library with storybooks for daily use. Finally, the program has a low teacher-to-child ratio, with few children to each teacher.

Educational Philosophy of Holistic Development

Young children's development is holistic. In the early years, young children are rapidly developing in all domains of development, including cognitive, physical, social, character, and spiritual (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Development is inter-related, meaning that development in one domain influences development in the other domains. Physical development ensures that children are strong and healthy so they can learn. Physical development also nurtures brain development (Trawick-Smith, 2014). Children learn from observations and interactions with teachers and other children, so social development is necessary for children's learning. Character development enables children to acquire the moral and ethical values necessary for working hard in school and using their learning to benefit their family and community. Spiritual development helps children understand the beauty and value in what they are learning.

However, many early childhood programs in Nigeria only focus on academic knowledge (Gyang, 2016; Haggai & Shwamut, 2016). The idea that early childhood education should only foster academic knowledge to prepare them for school is short-sighted. "Narrow focusing on academic skills is problematic during the years from 3 to 6, not only because it is potentially damaging to children's social and emotional development but also because it is intellectually limiting" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 99). An early childhood education that only focuses on academic skills can limit physical development, impair social and character development, and may even hurt cognitive development by limiting what and how young children learn.

Children need to know more than letters and numbers to be successful in school and, more importantly, to be successful later in life. Indeed, many educational experts say that positive social skills and character development are more important for future school success than basic knowledge such as reading or mathematics (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, & Gomby, 2005). To thrive both in school and life, all areas of development should be nurtured in early childhood programs (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; National Education Goals Panel, 1995),

Therefore, the goal for a high quality early childhood program should be to provide learning activities that nurture learning and growth in all domains of development within the child's cultural context (Akinsola, 2011). A holistic early childhood education focuses not only on academic knowledge, but more importantly on social, character, physical, and spiritual development as well as broader cognitive (thinking) skills. A holistic education not only better prepares children for school, but also helps children develop attitudes, values, knowledge, and skills that will help them thrive in life.

High quality early childhood programs should also incorporate children's culture into learning activities. Education is most effective when the cultural practices of children's families and communities are integrated into formal education (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). Integrating positive elements of indigenous African knowledge and learning activities nurtures holistic development and enables children to function successfully both within and outside of their cultural community (Akinsola, 2011). A culturally inclusive curriculum integrates the indigenous core values of a culture together with basic educational competencies (Esere, Omotosho, & Idowu, 2011). A culturally inclusive curriculum that integrates African knowledge, values, and learning activities together with global educational knowledge and practices will enable children to develop a secure African cultural identity (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). For example, an early childhood program can include indigenous stories, games, music, and dance.

Every high quality early childhood program has a philosophy of education. This is oftentimes written as the mission and core values of the school. The philosophy should include the goal of education (what education hopes to accomplish) and the methods that are

used to achieve that goal. Parents who are evaluating an early childhood program should ask about the philosophy of the school. This philosophy should focus on the holistic development of the child. There are many ways to describe holistic development, but the goals of every early childhood program should definitely include the keywords of cognitive, physical, and social development. Depending upon the nature of the school, other domains of development that may be included are character, emotional, and spiritual development. Furthermore, valuable aspects of the culture should also be included in the philosophy of the program.

A good early childhood program should not just have the philosophy written on paper, but the philosophy should impact practice. Parents can ask the school administrators and teachers how the program's philosophy guides classroom practice. One good answer to this question is that the teachers have ongoing professional development that helps them to understand and implement the school's philosophy. Other good answers include classroom practices or learning activities that nurture different domains of development. For example, a school that truly values physical development will have space in the daily timetable for children to participate in organized outdoor play activities.

High Quality Teachers

"Excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement" (Hattie, 2003, p. 4). Teachers set the mood of the classroom, choose appropriate learning objectives for each lesson, plan the most effective learning activities for the level of the children in the class, select and use appropriate learning materials, and guide children's learning and behavior (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Effective teachers not only engage children in learning, but foster an enjoyment of learning (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Therefore, when selecting an early childhood program, parents should investigate the quality of teachers at the school.

Most experts identify warm relationships between teachers and children as the most important quality of an effective early childhood educator (e.g., Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, 2000; Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2008). This is because learning occurs mostly through social interactions, particularly for young children (Epstein, 2014). Warm, nurturing relationships are important for young children's learning and development (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Decades of research have established the value and importance of positive relationships between children and teachers (e.g., Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, 2000; Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2016). Positive relationships between the teacher and child provide a safe environment for the child's learning as well as influence the physical structure of the brain by releasing chemicals that promote brain development (Dodge, Heroman, Colker, & Bickart, 2010). A positive relationship with the teacher can motivate the child's interest and engagement in learning activities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children who have positive relationships with their teachers have higher academic achievement, more enthusiasm for learning, better social and character skills, and more positive attitudes toward school, as well as higher motivation, engagement, self-direction, and cooperation. Indeed, Gopnik (2016) states, "Fundamental relationships of trust are more important than teaching strategies" (p. 146).

A formal qualification such as a certificate or degree in early childhood education can be useful for a high quality early childhood educator. Colker (2008) identifies additional characteristics of an excellent early childhood educator as passion, patience, flexibility, respect, creativity, and a love of learning. Skilled early childhood educators have a good understanding of three key topics: young children's development, instructional methods that are appropriate for young children, and curriculum planning (Gordon & Browne, 2016).

In addition to hiring high quality teachers, the early childhood program should have a system of ongoing professional development to ensure that each teacher and class assistant has updated knowledge and skills (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2008). The best early childhood programs have weekly training for their teachers, perhaps by closing school early one day of the week so that the teachers can receive training. Other programs incorporate professional development once per term, perhaps by organizing one week of training at the beginning of the term. All programs should have an orientation for new staff so they understand the program's philosophy as well as how the philosophy guides practice in the classroom.

In addition to ongoing professional development, high quality early childhood programs have regular supervision of its teachers and class assistants with the goal to improve teaching practice. The best early childhood programs have a teaching coach, one staff member whose primary responsibilities are planning professional development; providing guidance when a teacher needs assistance planning learning activities or guiding children; and regularly supervising teachers to offer encouragement, feedback, and suggestions for improvement.

When parents are investigating an early childhood program, they should observe the classrooms to determine the quality of relationships between the teachers and children. They can also talk to children who are currently enrolled in the program to find out what they think about their teachers. Children's responses can be very telling about the quality of relationships in the school. Parents can also interview the school administrators to ask about the criteria the school uses to hire new teachers as well as the professional development and supervision strategies in the school.

Developmentally Appropriate Content

The goals for many early childhood programs in Nigeria reflect the idea that the earlier children begin learning the knowledge and skills that are important for school, the more successful they will be (Korb, 2018a). Because of this, early childhood programs tend to teach young children the English and mathematics knowledge that they need to pass examinations in primary school. However, there is a proverb that says *Haste and hurry can only bear children with many regrets along the way.*

Young children are very gifted learners; however, it is important that children are taught concepts that they are capable of understanding. Much research has been conducted on how young children think, and how thinking abilities develop. This research shows that young children think differently from adults (Trawick-Smith, 2014). As a result, there are many concepts that are too complex for young children's thinking abilities. For example, young children should not be formally taught multiplication until Primary 3 (Cross, Woods, & Schweingruber, 2009) because truly understanding multiplication requires thinking skills that are too complicated for most young children.

This highlights the difference between rote memorization and conceptual understanding, a very important distinction. Rote memorization is the type of learning where children only memorize words that they repeat after the teacher. While rote memorization may enable children to retain facts so they can repeat it on an examination, this type of learning is ultimately ineffective because children will be unable to use this knowledge to learn more advanced concepts. To illustrate, young children can memorize the words, "One plus one equals two. Two plus two equals four. Four plus four equals eight." However, just because a child can repeat these words does not mean that she truly understands the concept of addition as combining one object with one other object to get a total of two objects. If children do not understand the concept of addition, then they will struggle to learn more advanced mathematical concepts such as adding double digit numbers, subtracting, and

multiplying. However, if young children have a deep understanding of the concept of addition, then more advanced mathematical concepts can easily build on this foundational knowledge.

Teaching concepts that are above the developmental level of a child leads to frustration and the child's withdrawal from learning (Stipek, 2017). Early childhood programs that try to teach advanced concepts to young children force children to memorize because their thinking abilities are simply not mature enough to handle complex concepts. Instead, there are many basic concepts and skills that young children can effectively learn that are a necessary foundation for more advanced topics. Because these concepts and skills are so basic, many adults do not even realize that children need to learn them. For example, to learn how to read, young children need to learn that letters are read and not pictures, text is read from left to right and top to bottom, and how to carefully turn the pages of a book one at a time from front to back (Korb, 2018b).

To determine whether an early childhood program teaches content that is developmentally appropriate for young children, parents can interview the school administrators about the learning objectives in the class. Learning objectives are the goals that teachers set for each learning activity. The learning objectives should focus on helping young children develop basic foundational skills and understandings. If the learning objectives are too advanced, then it means that the content may not be developmentally appropriate for young children. Parents can also talk to children who currently attend the school and ask them what they learned in school that day. If the child can give a good explanation and answer additional questions about what they have learned, then the content is likely developmentally appropriate. However, if the child simply repeats certain facts or figures, then the content is likely developmentally inappropriate.

Wide Variety of Playful, Exploratory Learning Activities

Direct instruction is the teaching strategy that most people think of, meaning that the teacher directly communicates new information to pupils. However, Slentz and Krogh (2001) report that direct instruction is *not* effective for teaching most skills to young children. Instead, young children need more engaging, hands-on instruction to learn effectively (Nsamenang, 2011). Research has shown that direct instruction can even hinder learning because it limits children's exploration and discovery (Bonawitz, Shafto, Gweon, Goodman, Spelke, & Schulz, 2011). In most cases, a more effective way of teaching is to provide playful opportunities for children to explore and interact with materials that have specific educational objectives. As children are playfully exploring, teachers can improve children's understanding by asking questions about what they are exploring, and then elaborating on children's answers (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe, & Golinkoff, 2013).

Instead of relying on direct instruction, a high quality early childhood program should use a wide variety of learning activities (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Perhaps the easiest way to determine whether an early childhood program is using a variety of learning activities is to consider how much time the children are taught as a whole class as compared to small groups. Young children need to participate in variety of groupings during the school day, including working alone, paired with one or two other children, small groups from four to seven children, and the entire class (Epstein, 2014). Research from many countries around the world shows that the more time that four year old children spend in whole group activities, the lower their thinking abilities at age seven (Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). On the other hand, children who had many opportunities to engage in small group learning activities had better thinking abilities. Teaching small groups of four to seven children is more effective for helping young children learn. When a teacher or class assistant is interacting with a small group of children, they can

more effectively provide support and feedback to help each child learn (Bredekamp, & Copple, 1997). Therefore, early childhood educators should only use whole class instruction two or three times during the school day, and for as little time as possible. Bredekamp (2011) recommends only 20 to 60 minutes total for direct instruction to the whole class for young children. Instead, a high quality early childhood program allows children to spend most of their time participating in small group activities.

Many, but not all, high quality early childhood programs take a learning centre approach to enable young children to participate in playful, exploratory activities. A learning centre is a specific area in the classroom with relevant learning materials that have a particular learning purpose (Bredekamp, 2011). Each learning centre has a theme. The themes of some learning centres can be a particular content area such as the literacy centre, mathematics centre, science centre, English centre, or social studies centre. Other learning centres focus on holistic development, which may include a library centre, blocks centre, sand play centre, water play centre, dramatic play centre, cultural centre, music centre, writing centre, and art centre. If the early childhood program takes the learning centre approach, then multiple learning centres will be arranged in different parts of the classroom. A learning centre will likely have a table or a storage cabinet with learning materials related to the learning centre theme that young children can playfully interact with to foster development. For example, a science learning centre may have a variety of natural objects such as seeds, soil, flowers, leaves, and rocks. Children can then plant and water seeds, explore and describe the different parts of the flower, and sort rocks and leaves. A large block of time (45 to 90 minutes) is dedicated to learning centre time, during which children choose activities within one learning centre to engage in small groups or independently. Children typically direct their own learning at the learning centres, which nurtures vital self-regulation skills. Meanwhile, the teacher and class assistants actively observe the children and guide their learning by providing guidance, feedback, and asking children instructional questions.

Play is one of the key ways by which young children learn and develop in all areas of development (Omotuyole, 2016; van Horn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2003). As such, play should be used as a primary teaching strategy in early childhood programs. Guided play is a teaching method in which a playful activity is used to teach academic skills and concepts (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). For example, children can practice identifying letters by a modified Bingo game. They can also practice subtraction by a game where the teacher first shows a small set of objects (e.g., 4 seeds), and then hides a few, and children have to guess how many objects the teacher is hiding by using principles of subtraction. High quality early childhood programs incorporate play into their learning activities.

Other effective teaching methods in early childhood programs include storytelling, discussions, question-and-answer, demonstration, exploration, and modeling (Bredekamp, 2011; Korb, 2018a). Every teacher should use a wide variety of teaching methods each day.

Parent can identify the teaching methods in an early childhood program in multiple ways. First, the parent can observe a classroom. Second, the parent can look at the class timetable to determine whether multiple activities are included throughout the day, including time for small group instruction, outdoor playtime, and child-initiated activities. Third, the parent can interview the school administrator and/or teacher to ask what types of learning activities are commonly used.

Parents should also carefully consider their image of an effective early childhood classroom. Many visualize an ideal classroom as one where all children are quietly seated at their desks vigorously working on an assignment independently. While this may be an effective classroom for older children and adults, this is *not* an effective classroom for young children. As will be explained in the next section, language is perhaps the most important domain for young children's development. Young children also need physical movement in

order to develop their strength, coordination, fine and gross motor skills, and brain. Social development is also at a critical stage in early childhood. A child who is seated quietly at his desk is not practicing language skills, not moving to develop his physical abilities, nor interacting with other children to develop social skills. This image of an effective classroom is inappropriate for young children.

Instead, an effective early childhood classroom is one where children are actively learning by describing their learning and asking questions, exploring and discovering, taking things apart and putting them back together, singing, laughing, and even dancing. While one important goal of early childhood education is to train children to be obedient and self-controlled, young children also need to be actively involved in learning, which may appear to be rather chaotic to a parent who considers learning to be a still, silent endeavor. A high-quality early childhood classroom effectively balances children's need to explore and discover with teaching children self-control and obedience.

Learning Materials: Storybooks

Language is an essential foundation for learning and growth in all other areas of development. Language skills influence social development because a child must be able to communicate in order to develop relationships. Academic achievement is also closely related to language competence because children need strong language skills to learn mathematics, science, social studies, and civic education (Oyetunde, 2013) and even think and solve problems more effectively (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Because of the importance of language as a foundation for other areas of growth, Bredekamp (2011) proposed that the development of language is the most important task in the first five years of a child's life.

Strong reading skills are also vital for future success (Otto, 2008). Reading skills are critical for future success in school (Duncan et al., 2007; Strickland, 2010) because learning in all subjects depends on the basic skill of reading (Chris-Okafor, 2014). Individuals with good reading abilities are more likely to get a job, have a higher salary, and are less likely to become criminals (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). Research also shows that children who have strong reading abilities by seven years have higher salaries, better houses, and better jobs at age 40 (Ritchie & Bates, 2013). In addition to professional success, the ability to read is necessary for getting information about important issues in health, society, and politics (Greaney, 1996). Therefore, helping children develop strong reading skills is perhaps the most important learning goal for early childhood education.

Research has provided overwhelming evidence that reading high quality, meaningful literature with young children promotes both language development and reading skills (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Morrow & Asbury, 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The more frequently that a young child is exposed to storybooks, the better their language and reading skills will be (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996; International Reading Association, 1999).

Reading storybooks out loud to young children not only develops the vital skills of language and reading, but it also fosters holistic development. Reading storybooks helps children learn general knowledge about the world as well as improves their vocabulary and listening skills (Strickland, 2010). Reading out loud with children fosters brain development (Hutton, Horowitz-Kraus, Mendelsohn, DeWitt, & Holland, 2015) as well as improves children's social and emotional skills (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014).

Because of the profound importance of reading storybooks with young children, the most important learning material for an early childhood program, from the crèche through Primary 3, is storybooks. Teachers should read a storybook to the class at least once per day (Korb, 2018a). Teachers should read to children both in large and small groups of children

(Bredekamp, 2011). Furthermore, a child should have access to storybooks on a daily basis, even if that child cannot yet pronounce the words in the book. Exposure to books nurtures an interest in reading and develops print awareness, which are important emergent literacy skills. Young children can also learn general knowledge and comprehension as they study the pictures in storybooks. Even infants, who cannot yet speak, still benefit from being read to because hearing language lays the foundation for future language and literacy development.

  Therefore, parents should look at the school facilities to confirm that there is a school library well stocked with picture books and storybooks that children visit regularly. Each classroom should also have a smaller library (at least one shelf of books) that children can look at on a daily basis. These libraries should be stocked with more than just textbooks. High quality picture books and storybooks are more interesting and engaging for young children than textbooks and, as such, promote better language skills and emergent literacy skills than textbooks. Therefore, the majority of the books in the libraries should be storybooks. These books should be attractive and relevant to the culture to develop the child's interest in reading. The libraries can also be stocked with books that are created by the teacher or written by the children in the class, which can be very motivating for young children to read. The more young children are exposed to interesting books, the better their language and reading skills will be.

Televisions in Early Childhood Programs

  Many parents and teachers believe that televisions are an essential learning material for an early childhood program. Research has found that high-quality educational television programs can have a positive influence on the academic performance of young children three years and older (Fisch & Truglio, 2011). However, this research finding only applies to high-quality educational programs, and for children over the age of three years.

  In contrast, considerable research has found that non-educational television programs, which includes all cartoons, can have a negative impact on academic performance (Lin, Cherng, Chen, Chen, & Yang, 2015; Nathanson, Aladé, Sharp, Rasmussen, & Christy, 2014; Pagani, Fitzpatrick, Barnett, & Dubow, 2010). Furthermore, watching too much television can lead to poor physical, social, and cognitive development (Conners-Burrow, McKelvey, & Fussell, 2011).

  Television is generally an ineffective learning material because it provides only one-way instruction. As mentioned earlier, young children learn best through relationships and reciprocal interactions. Children need one-on-one guidance, feedback, and discussions to effectively learn. Young children especially need interactions to learn language, which many parents erroneously believe that television can teach children. However, Naigles and Mayeux (2001) concluded that children learn language best by interactive conversations, whereas television viewing is typically one-sided, leaving children passive. Passively viewing television is an ineffective way to learn language, as well as almost all other content.

  Based on these research findings, the Canadian Paediatric Society (2017) recommends that young children's exposure to television be minimized. Therefore, this author is of the opinion that early childhood programs should not have televisions. Instead, the financial resources required for a television set and cable subscription are more wisely invested in storybooks. In contrast to television, there is incontrovertible evidence that exposure to books from infancy has many benefits for young children's language development, reading development, and social development (Fisher, Flood, & Lapp, 2003).

Low Teacher-to-Child Ratio

  The Cost, Quality, & Outcomes Study Team (1995) found that the most important feature of a good early childhood program was the number of children to each teacher in the

classroom. This finding has been supported by many other research studies (e.g., Huntsman, 2008; Sagi, Koren-Karie, Gini, Ziv, & Joels, 2002; von Suchodoletz, Fäsche, Gunzenhauser, & Hamre, 2014). Young children learn best through interactions and relationships with adults (Korb, 2018a). Children need one-on-one interactions to receive guidance for their learning, get feedback on their performance, engage in conversations that nurture language development, develop strong social relationships, and receive correction in character. In overcrowded classrooms with many young children and only one teacher, young children do not get this one-on-one attention that they need to thrive.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2015) recommends that from two and a half years through five years of age, there should be no more than ten pupils per adult in the classroom, combining teachers and class assistants. Nigeria's National Policy on Education recommends a teacher-pupil ratio of one caregiver to ten children in crèche and one caregiver to 25 children in nursery and pre-primary (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, this is the minimum standard, and high quality early childhood programs should have a lower teacher-to-child ratio.

To determine the teacher-to-child ratio, parents can ask school administrators how many children are currently in the class in which they plan to enrol their child, as well as how many teachers and/or class assistants are in the class. All early childhood classrooms should have at least two adults, either two teachers or one teacher and one class assistant. The number of the children in the class can be larger for older children. Ideally, crèches should have no more than 15 children, classes for three and four year olds should have no more than 20 children, and classes for five and six year olds should have no more than 25 children.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis in this paper, the following recommendations are made.

- School administrators should prepare electronic and/or printed informational resources for parents considering their early childhood program. The resources should include the mission and core values of the school, the goals of education, the teaching methods that the school uses to achieve the goals, the criteria used to hire teachers, the school's curriculum, common learning activities and learning materials within each classroom, and the average teacher to child ratio at each level. This will enable parents to efficiently investigate the quality of the program, as well as reduce the need for parents to interview school administrators and teachers.
- Parents should investigate early childhood programs at least six months before they plan to enroll their child. This will enable them to observe the program while it is in session, which is necessary to identify the quality of teachers, learning activities, and instructional content. While evaluating the program, parents can do the following.
  - Collect electronic or printed informational resources to identify the degree to which the program meets the six criteria of an effective program.
  - Interview the school administrator with the following questions. (Note that some of these questions may be answered in the school's informational resources. If so, there may not be a need to ask all of the suggested questions to the school administrator, teacher, and/or students.)
    - What are the school's mission and core values? What are the school's goals of education, and what methods are used to achieve the goals?
    - What is the school's educational philosophy? What are the goals of education? What methods are used to achieve these goals?
    - What criteria do you use when you hire new teachers?
    - What is your plan for professional development for your teachers?
    - What are typical learning objectives for children in this class?

- - What types of learning activities do children participate in on a typical day?
    - What is the teacher-to-child ratio?
  - Interview teachers at the school with the following questions.
    - What is the school's educational philosophy? How does this philosophy guide your classroom practices and learning activities?
    - What are typical learning objectives for children in this class?
    - What types of learning activities do children participate in on a typical day?
    - How much time do children spend learning in whole class instruction? How much time do children spend learning in small group instruction?
  - Observe a classroom in the school, preferably at the level in which the child will be enrolled. Key features to look for are as follows.
    - What is the quality of relationships between the teacher/class assistant and children?
    - Does the daily timetable include activities that nurture holistic development and a variety of teaching strategies?
    - Do children spend most of their time actively involved in playful, exploratory learning activities?
    - Are a variety of teaching strategies used each day?
    - Do children spend most of their time learning in small groups?
    - Is there a well-stocked school library that the children frequently visit?
    - Is there a well-stocked classroom library that is accessible for children?
  - Interview children already enrolled in the program with the following questions.
    - What do you think of your teacher?
    - What did you learn in school today? *Then follow up with additional questions about what they learned to determine if they are just repeating what they memorized, or if they really understand it.*
- Parents should carefully consider their image of an ideal classroom in light of considerable research evidence that children need to be active in the learning process.
- School proprietors and administrators should regularly evaluate their early childhood programs to determine whether they meet these criteria of an effective early childhood program.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper identified six criteria of a high quality early childhood program. First, high quality early childhood programs have the goal to nurture holistic development, including cognitive, physical, social, character, and spiritual development. The second criteria of a high quality early childhood program is high quality teachers, particularly teachers who have warm, responsive relationships with each child. Thirdly, the content of instruction should be developmentally appropriate, meaning that children are not being forced to learn content that is too advanced for their still-developing thinking abilities. The fourth criteria is that very little direct instruction should be used, but instead children should participate in playful and exploratory learning activities. Fifthly, the most important learning material for a high quality early childhood program is storybooks, so each school and classroom should have a library with storybooks for daily use. Finally, the program has a low teacher-to-child ratio, with few children to each teacher.

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