An Investigation into the Quality of Selected Private Nursery Schools in Jos Metropolis

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Abstract

The effectiveness of an ECE programme in promoting a child's holistic learning and development depends on four important quality standards: quality teachers, effective curriculum, stimulating learning environment, and positive home-school relationships. The purpose of this study was to investigate the quality of selected private nursery schools in Jos metropolis based on these four criteria. A descriptive research design was used. Participants were nursery school administrators from 135 private nursery schools in Jos. Data were collected using an interview protocol. Results found that only one of the four criteria for a quality nursery programme was attained by a majority of schools: positive home-school relationships, while the other three quality standards of quality teachers, effective curriculum, and stimulating learning environment were not attained by a majority of schools. In conclusion, this implies that most private nursery schools in Jos metropolis need to improve by providing continuous professional development for their teachers, adopting curriculums that are holistic and developmentally appropriate, and providing developmentally and culturally relevant learning materials.

Keywords: Quality Standards, Early Childhood Education**,** Professional Development Early Childhood Curriculum**,**Home-School Relationship

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is one of the best investments for impacting societal outcomes (Hendren & Sprung-Kyser, 2019). Specifically, high-quality ECE programs lead to lower rates of special education diagnoses and grade retention, as well as increased high school graduation rates (McCoy et al., 2017). The Perry Project demonstrated that ECE programs positively impact individuals, communities, and equity through improved educational, health, and economic outcomes as well as reduced crime for children from low-income backgrounds (Heckman et al., 2010). While research on the outcomes of ECE in sub-Saharan Africa is limited, there is preliminary evidence of similar effects (Bago et al., 2020).

Indeed, "Quality ECE is a powerful tool with which to address early disadvantages and inequality" (Bendini et al., 2022, p. 3). In fact, children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more from quality ECE. However, the *quality* of an ECE program is vital, with poor-quality programs potentially having detrimental effects (Melhuish et al., 2015). Even small improvements in quality lead to better outcomes (Howes et al., 2008).

Nigeria's National Policy on Nursery Education

Nigeria's National Policy on education mandates one-year pre-primary education before a child enters primary one (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This one-year pre-primary is important to prepare the child for the education that they will receive in primary school. This preparation is done through various activities and experiences, such as exploring nature, the environment, art, music, and play. Key pre-primary objectives include ensuring a smooth transition from home to school; preparing the child for primary education; developing social and character values; and teaching the basics of print awareness, mathematics, and science.

Below the pre-primary level, early child care development and education (ECCDE) is targeted for children from zero to 4 years of age (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). It has similar objectives, including the emphasis on exploration and play.

Quality Standards for Nursery Education

There are four important quality standards for high quality nursery education: quality teachers, effective curriculum, stimulating learning environment, and positive home-school relationships. Quality ECE depends largely on the teacher, who facilitates responsive interactions

focused on skill development with children (Bendini et al., 2022). Early childhood educators need "specific preparation, knowledge, and skills in child development and early childhood education" (NAEYC, 2019, p. 78). The role of the teacher in delivering a sound education is key. It is logical to expect that quality teachers will deliver quality education, while conversely, poor teachers will deliver poor education. A teacher's plan of activities for the lesson, demeanour in the class, creative use of learning materials, and even classroom decoration and setting can set a vibrant mood for effective learning. Therefore, to maintain quality standards for nursery education, qualified teachers should be employed to teach, and they should participate in ongoing professional development to facilitate improvements in the quality and relevance of their teaching skills.

High quality ECE programs require well-planned curriculum, which includes goals for what children learn and plans for learning activities that are linked to the goals (NAEYC, 2024). There are two key features of an effective curriculum. First, the curriculum is holistic, which means that it should not focus on just one area of development, but instead addresses all aspects of children's learning and development (NAEYC, 2020). Early childhood curriculum should address all domains of learning, including the cognitive, physical, social, and character domains. Second, an effective curriculum is appropriate to children's developmental level. NAEYC defines developmentally appropriate practice as methods that promote each child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning (2020).

Effective learning can only take place in a stimulating environment. Early childhood centres should provide appropriate indoor and outdoor environments, which include the facilities, equipment, and learning materials to promote playful learning (NAEYC, 2024). Indeed, the Nigerian Minimum Standard for Early Child Care recommends that the learning environment for early child care should have a spacious playground and classrooms with adequate furniture and learning aids (NERDC, 2007). While minimum standards mandate a classroom and school free from safety hazards, high quality classrooms are warm and inviting in appearance. Because play is integral to the learning and development of young children, a wide variety of developmentally and culturally appropriate play materials should be neatly organized and maintained in the classroom and accessible to children.

Early childhood classrooms should also be language-rich, including displays on the walls and a classroom library that features storybooks (Korb & Selzing-Musa, 2019).

Finally, parents are partners with teachers in fostering the development of children. Experiences in the classroom should complement the home. NAEYC reports, "Children's motivation to learn is increased when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency. Curricula and teaching methods build on each child's assets by connecting their experiences in the school or learning environment to their home and community settings" (NAEYC, 2020, p. 11).

The Current Study

Even though early childhood education has been an important part of the National Policy on Education for decades, there is still widespread concern about the quality of ECE programmes offered in Nigeria (see Ogunode & Akinsua-Ajape, 2021; Rike, 2023). Four standards for high-quality early childhood education have been identified above: quality teachers, effective curriculum, stimulating learning environment, and positive home-school relationships. The purpose of this study is to investigate the quality of selected nursery schools in Jos Metropolis.

Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the quality of selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis. Specific objectives included the following.

- Evaluate the quality of teachers in selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis by quantifying the number of teachers who are trained in ECE.
- Evaluate the quality of teachers in selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis by quantifying the number of nursery schools that send their teachers for continuous professional development.
- Evaluate the quality of curriculum in selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis by quantifying the number of schools that incorporate holistic development in their curriculum via character education.

- Evaluate the quality of curriculum in selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis by quantifying how many schools use only Nursery 3 curriculum in Nursery 3 classrooms.
- Evaluate the quality of learning environment in selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis by evaluating the quality of the physical learning environment.
- Evaluate the quality of home-school relationships in selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis through administrator report.
- Identify the challenges faced by private nursery school administrators in Jos Metropolis in their efforts to create a quality nursery education.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. How many nursery teachers in private schools in Jos Metropolis are trained in ECE?
2. How many private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis send their teachers for continuous professional development?
3. How many private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis use only the Nursery 3 curriculum?
4. How many private nursery schools in Jos incorporate holistic development in their curriculum via character education?
5. What is the quality of the physical learning environment in private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis?
6. What is the quality of home-school relationships amongst private schools in Jos Metropolis from the administrators' perspectives?
7. What challenges do administrators face in creating a quality nursery education?

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive research design was employed to investigate the quality of selected private nursery schools in Jos metropolis. The quality of nursery schools was evaluated based on four standards for high-quality early childhood education: quality teachers, effective curriculum,

stimulating learning environment, and positive home-school relationships. Interviews were conducted with nursery school administrators to answer the research questions.

Participants

Our unit of study was private nursery schools. A total of 135 private nursery schools in Jos were identified and agreed to participate in the study. To select participating schools, research assistants traversed major roads in Jos and went to every nursery school they encountered. Interviews were then conducted with nursery school administrators to answer the research questions.

Private schools were selected for this study because LGEA schools were on strike at the time of data collection.

Instrument

The participants were interviewed using open-ended questions. The data for this study were collected as part of a larger interview schedule. This study focused on responses to six questions. How many teachers from nursery one to nursery three have training in early childhood education (Research Question 1)? Do any of your nursery one to three teachers have any other type of training in early childhood education, such as attending workshops or seminars (Research Question 2)? Is character education being taught in your school at the nursery level (Research Question 3)? What level of curriculum do you teach nursery three (Research Question 4)? From your experience, how cooperative are the pupils' parents in terms of the home-school relationship (Research Question 5)? What is your biggest challenge in providing a high-quality education for the pupils in nursery (Research Question 7)? Probing questions were used to draw out more information on participants' responses.

Research question 6 which focused on the quality of the learning environment was addressed through observation. Trained research assistants visited one of the nursery classrooms, and then rated the school according to the following rankings. Unacceptable meant that the school had dilapidated structures with no learning materials. Poor meant that the facilities were reasonable but very few learning materials. Average meant that the school had nice facilities and reasonable learning materials. Good meant that the school had excellent facilities with exceptional learning materials.

Procedure for Data Collection

The interviews were conducted with nursery school administrators in their offices during school hours. Research assistants followed an interview protocol and audio recorded responses. Interviews ranged from a minimum of 5 minutes and 7 seconds to a maximum of 23 minutes and 22 seconds. Research assistants coded interview responses based on a coding sheet. The interviews took 5 working days to complete.

Results

The results are guided by the research questions.

RQ1: The first research question asked, how many nursery teachers in private schools in Jos Metropolis are trained in ECE. To answer this research question, we asked school administrators to report how many Nursery 1 to 3 teachers they had at their school. Then we also asked them how many Nursery 1 to Nursery 3 teachers were trained in ECE. The data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Quality of Teachers: Pre-Service Training in Early Childhood Education.

Quality of Teachers	Frequency	Percent
Trained in ECE	224	32.80%
Not Trained in ECE	459	67.20%
Total	683	100.00%

Of the total number of nursery teachers, 32.80% of teachers were trained in ECE while 67.20% were not trained in ECE. This means that the number of teachers who are not trained in ECE is higher than the number of teachers who are trained. Additionally, a total of 49 schools from our sample reported that none of their nursery teachers had received training in ECE (36.30% of the schools). This shows that most nursery schools do not meet the criteria of employing nursery teachers who received their pre-service training in ECE.

RQ2: The second research question asked, how many private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis send their teachers for continuous professional development. We also asked school administrators whether their nursery teachers received ongoing professional development in ECE such as workshops and seminars. The data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Quality of Teachers: Schools that Send Nursery Teachers for Continuous Professional Development.

Quality of teachers	Frequency	Percent
Receive Continuous Professional Development	80	61.07%
Do Not Receive Continuous Professional Development	51	38.93%

Table 2 shows that a majority of schools send their teachers for continuous professional development. This shows that many nursery schools are attempting to improve the quality of their teachers through continuous professional development.

RQ3: The third research question asked, how many private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis use only the Nursery 3 curriculum. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Effective Curriculum: Developmental Level of Curriculum in Schools.

Quality Curriculum	Frequency	Percent
Nursery 3 Only	37	42.53%
Nursery 3 and Primary 1	13	14.94%
Primary 1	37	42.53%

Table 3 shows that less than half of the private nursery schools in Jos metropolis exclusively use a developmentally-appropriate Nursery 3 curriculum. Again, a majority of ECE programmes do not meet the criteria of using a developmentally-appropriate curriculum.

RQ4: The fourth research question asked, how many private nursery schools in Jos incorporate holistic development in their curriculum via character education. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Effective Curriculum: Schools that Incorporate Holistic Development via Character Education[1]

Quality Curriculum	Frequency	Percent
Teaches Character Education	34	25.95%
Does Not Teach Character Education	97	74.05%

Table 4 shows that less than half of the private nursery schools in Jos incorporate holistic development in their curriculum via character education. This confirmed that a majority of ECE programmes do not meet the criteria of having a holistic curriculum via character education.

RQ5: The fifth research question asked, what is the quality of the physical learning environment in private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis. Recall that this research question was answered through observation by our research assistants according to the following rankings. Unacceptable meant that the school had dilapidated structures with no learning materials. Poor meant that the facilities are reasonable but very few learning materials. Average meant that the school had nice facilities and reasonable learning materials. Good meant that the school had excellent facilities with exceptional learning materials. The data is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Quality of Physical Learning Environment.

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Unacceptable	24	20.00%
Poor	52	43.33%
Average	35	29.17%
Good	9	7.50%

[1] Note: This data is also presented in Korb, K. A., Sule, J., Ishaku, U. G., Selzing-Musa, G., & Ngwodo N. (2024). *An investigation into character education in early childhood education in Jos metropolis: Considerations for curriculum and stakeholders.* Paper presented at 15th Early Childhood Association of Nigeria Annual National Conference.

As can be seen in Table 5, a majority of the schools were rated as either unacceptable or poor. Only a very small minority (7.5%) was rated as having a good learning environment.

RQ6: The sixth research question asked, what is the quality of home-school relationships amongst private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis from the administrators' perspectives. The data is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Quality of Relationship between the School and Parents.

Quality of Relationship	Frequency	Percent
Cooperative	72	54.96%
In-Between	53	40.46%
Non-Cooperative	6	4.58%

Table 6 shows that about half of the schools reported a cooperative relationship between the school and parents, and most of the rest reported "in between" (meaning neither cooperative nor uncooperative). This means that nursery schools in Jos are about average in the criteria of positive home-school relationships.

RQ7: The final research question asked, what challenges do administrators face in creating a quality nursery education. Since this was an open-ended item, their responses were coded thematically. We used the four criteria of a high-quality ECE program as themes. The data is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Challenges faced by Administrators in creating Quality Nursery Education.

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Learning Environment	48	53.33%
Home-school Relationships	23	25.56%
Quality Teachers	13	14.44%
Effective Curriculum	6	6.67%

As can be seen in Table 7, half of the participants are faced with the challenges related to the learning environment, such as lack of learning materials. For many administrators, this was closely related to lack of funding. The next most frequent challenge was quality of the home-school relationships. For example, administrators reported lack of parent involvement in the school and parents being uninterested in their children's education. Another prominent challenge was related to quality teachers, with many school administrators reporting a lack of qualified teachers. A further 6 administrators reported challenges related to the curriculum, which included lack of curriculum and lack of teachers' guides.

Other challenges were also mentioned, though they could not be classified into our themes. Challenges related to individual differences of learning and pupils being slow to learn were other responses frequently given.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the quality of selected private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis. We identified four standards evaluating the quality of early childhood programmes: quality teachers, effective curriculum, stimulating learning environment, and positive home-school relationships.

For the first standard of quality teachers, we found that only 1 in 3 nursery teachers at our selected schools in Jos Metropolis have pre-service training in ECE. More concerning, almost 1 in 3 nursery schools in Jos Metropolis did not have a single nursery teacher trained in ECE. On a positive note, a majority of the nursery schools send their teachers for continuous professional development. "Children in early learning programs benefit most when teaching and administrative staff have high levels of formal education and specialized preparation" (NAEYC, 2019, p. 78). However, in general, most nursery schools in Jos Metropolis do not have quality teachers, judging by the degree of training received.

The second standard of a high-quality ECE programme is an effective curriculum. We found that most nursery schools in Jos metropolis are not adopting a holistic curriculum and are also not adopting a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Instead, most schools focus exclusively on

academic learning, and are pushing children to learn curriculum that is more advanced than their developmental level. Developmental experts Bredekamp and Copple report, “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” (1997, p. 99). In other words, young children need to develop more holistic intellectual skills such as executive functioning, problem solving and scientific inquiry skills, as well as develop curiosity and creativity. When schools use curriculums that are too narrow and not developmentally appropriate, then they are limiting children’s current and future academic success. Most nursery schools in Jos Metropolis are not using an effective curriculum.

The third criteria is a stimulating learning environment. By our ratings, only 1 out of 3 nursery schools in Jos Metropolis had acceptable school facilities and learning materials. The final criteria was positive home-school relationships. According to our findings, this is the only criteria of an effective ECE program that a majority of private nursery schools in Jos met.

To fully comprehend our results, we compared our findings from private nursery schools in Jos Metropolis to administrators’ report of the challenges they face from the last research question. The most commonly reported challenge was related to the learning environment, which we also found was seriously lacking in most nursery schools from our observation ratings. However, the next most frequently reported challenge was the home-school relationship. This is in conflict with our evaluation, which found that this is the one criterion of an effective ECE program that was reasonably met by nursery schools. When we asked school administrators, “how cooperative are the pupils’ parents in terms of the home/school relationship?” only five percent of the administrators reported non-cooperative parents. Perhaps the administrators were giving a socially desirable response to this question, and the criteria of a positive home-school relationship is weaker than found by our research methods.

In addition, contrary to our finding that most schools are not using a holistic curriculum and are also not using a developmentally-appropriate curriculum, only six administrators reported curriculum as a challenge. This may likely be due to lack of administrators’ understanding of ECE: they may not realize the importance and need to implement holistic and developmentally-appropriate

curriculum, consequently trivializing this challenge. Indeed, NAEYC recommends that nursery school administrators should also have "specialized, formal early childhood professional preparation" (2019, p. 82).

Conclusion

A high-quality ECE programme is a powerful way to positively impact individuals, families, and societies. Children who participate in a quality ECE programme have improved educational, health, and economic outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the quality of private nursery schools in Jos metropolis based on four criteria: quality teachers, effective curriculum, stimulating learning environment, and positive home-school relationships. We found that most private nursery schools in Jos metropolis only met one of the four standards of a quality ECE programme: administrators reported acceptable home-school relationships. Regrettably, three of the four criteria were not met by most of the private nursery schools in Jos metropolis: quality teachers, effective curriculum, nor a stimulating learning environment. This implies that most private nursery schools in Jos metropolis need to improve the quality of their ECE programmes, especially on those three dimensions, as a matter of urgency.

Recommendations

As reported earlier, even small improvements in the quality of ECE programs can enhance associated outcomes (Howes et al., 2008) – including educational, health, and economic outcomes. Therefore, the following recommendations are proffered.

- School administrators should prioritize professional development for their nursery educators. Schools can organize professional development activities before the start of each term, as well as weekly throughout the term. They can also send their educators for workshops and seminars that are organized by educational institutions and organizations.
- School administrators should adopt curriculums that are holistic, including character education. Curriculums should also promote physical and social development, as well as holistic cognitive skills such as executive functioning, problem solving skills, and scientific inquiry skills.

- Learning materials for nursery pupils should include a wide variety of developmentally and culturally appropriate play materials as well as storybooks. Gathering these learning materials takes time and effort, but does not necessarily require considerable funding. Children play best with what they know best, so educators can collect used, recycled, and natural materials in the everyday environment for children to actively engage with.

List of Abbreviations

- ECE Early Childhood Education
- ECCDE Early Childhood Care and Development Education
- NAEYC National Association for the Education of Young Children
- NERDC Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council
- LGEA Local Government Education Authority
- RQ Research Question

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