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PROFESSIONALISM OF CAREGIVERS AS A PIVOT TO EFFECTIVE LITERACY SKILLS IN PRE- SCHOOL CLASSES

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the qualifications of caregivers/teachers as well as the level of professionalism and teaching methods of literacy skills carried out in preschool classes. The study adopted descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all caregivers in private schools in Iwo Local Government, Area of Osun state, Nigeria. The sample consist 3 teachers that were purposively selected from 20 private schools that were randomly selected using simple random sampling technique to make a total number of 60 caregivers. Self - developed questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Data collected were analyzed using frequency count, percentage, and standard deviation. The results revealed that low percentage 6.7% of caregivers were ECCE certificated, 43.3% had other education disciplines, 46.7% were registered under Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), 52.2% uses the expected methodology for teaching literacy skills while 67.2% were engaged in various professional development and collaborate in teaching literacy skills. It can be concluded that the professionalism of pre-school caregivers/teachers in term of certification is very low, less than 50% were professionally registered but the methodology applied in teaching literacy skills are appropriate. The study recommended that school owners should make recruitment of ECCE professionals a priority and encourage caregivers to engage more in professional development that will equip them in the field of ECCE.

Keywords: Caregiver, Early Childhood Education, Literacy Skills, Professionalism, Young Children

INTRODUCTION

The quality of care and education experienced by young children from the caregivers at development center/crèche and pre-school classes during their early years had been confirmed by researchers that it has a lasting impact on their holistic development (Temitope & Opeyemi, 2023). This could explain why professionalism of caregivers/teachers in the field of early childhood education should serve as an important criteria when recruiting staff for this level of education but from observation this is often overlooked by school owners and even the government (Nasution & Nurhafizah, 2019). Professionalism of caregivers/teachers in the field of early childhood care and education (ECCE) involves experts who had gone through appropriate training at the College of Education or University and had been exposed to knowledge of child development (Intarti, 2019).

It is important to note that in the 21st century the services of caregivers/teachers who are qualified professionals in the field of ECCE is very essential to achieve quality early childhood care and education in Nigeria (Owojori & Gbenga-Akanmu, 2021). In a situation where this is lacking ECCE may experience ineffectiveness and this may have negative impact on children development (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021), and as result Nigerian children may not receive the quality care and education needed to thrive in becoming a responsible adult in the society. Professionalism of caregivers/teachers is the key ingredient to achieve quality and effective early childhood education (Lawal & Orisade, 2024). Therefore, it is expected of any experts teaching or caring at this level

of education to exhibit proficiency or ability in carrying out their duties as expected of them with or without any supervision.

Education International and United Nation Education scientific and cultural organization (Shaturaev, 2021) stated that early childhood as a profession cannot be negotiated as no human would want unqualified surgeons operating on their children, as a result of this no space will be granted to unqualified caregivers/teachers. This explains why it is essential to employ an expert in the field of early childhood education to handle young children in the early years most especially at preschool level where children learn language development and literacy skills (Melnyk et al., 2021).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (Hawrilenko et al., 2021) outline six (6) professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators which includes; (i) understanding the children unique development, learning in relation to multilingual contexts and the use of multidimensional knowledge to make evidence base decision. ii) Partnerships with families and community of young children they serve in the child development and learning, iii) understand that assessment are carried out to make informed decision, iv) understand and use teaching skills that are responsive to the learning trajectories of young children and the needs of each child, v) have knowledge of the content of the academic disciplines such as literacy and language, arts, mathematics etc., vi) participate in professional development and collaborate with peers.

It can be confirmed from the aforementioned above all that is required in becoming a professional in the field of early childhood education. However, findings revealed that professionalism also includes a range of competences, such as ethical behavior, pedagogical knowledge and communication skills (Ridei, 2021). It is therefore important to note that for effective communication skills to take place among children there is need for proper training of literacy skills by caregivers/teachers and this encompass a range of abilities related to language skills (receptive and expressive) such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, word recognition strategies and fluency building practice (Mendez et al., 2023).

In other to teach literacy skills in preschool classes caregiver/ teachers needs to be aware that early childhood education is centered on child needs and interest and therefore the curriculum to use for teaching at this stage must be emergent curriculum where there will be combination of hands-activities, (such as play-based learning, sensory activities, storytelling, read aloud, structured learning activities and outdoor exploration) and the instructional materials to be used are stated in the curriculum (Cade et al., 2022). (Capone 2022) stated that in a classroom where child centered approach is used, the teacher is expected to plan the lessons with the pupil's needs in view, where there will be more pupils' activity than teacher's activity. The teacher in child centered education is regarded as facilitator of learning not a director of learning (Marwanto, 2021).

There are so many benefits associated with child centered approached such as children learn to make decision on their own, they get a feelings of belonging by taking part in activity planning, the child holistic development will be addressed and also allow the child to develop confident and independent Welsh Joint Education Committee (Cahyati et al., 2022). Educators can become more

effective in promoting literacy skills by taking advantage of professional opportunities and continue training (Mi'rajiatinnor et al., 2022). Caregivers/teachers teaching in preschool classes need to become a professional in the field of ECCE so as to discharge his/her duties effectively by using the right methodology, they also need to engage in professional development because as a teacher you need to learn, relearn and unlearn so as to stay relevant in the field. From the foregoing it is important to investigate the professionalism of caregivers and teachers on effective literacy skills for young children in pre- school classes. This study aims to investigate several key aspects of pre-school education. Specifically, it will: 1) examine the qualifications of caregivers/teachers working in pre-school classes; 2) investigate the level of professionalism exhibited by these caregivers/teachers; and 3) assess the methods of teaching pre-school literacy skills applied by these educators.

METHODS

The study adopted descriptive survey research design. The population of this study consist of all caregivers/teachers in the private pre-school classes in Iwo Local government Area of Osun State. 20 private schools were randomly selected, in each of the schools 3 teachers were purposively selected in Nursery 1-3. The sample size consist of 60 pre-school caregiver/teachers that were purposively selected. A self -designed questionnaire titled Professionalism of Caregivers on Teaching Literacy Skills at Pre-School Level Questionnaire (PCTLSPLQ) was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire had three sections, section A consist of caregiver/teacher bio data and section B consists of items on professional development and collaboration of teachers while Section C consists of items on caregivers instructional methods of teaching literacy skills. The data were analyzed using frequency count, percentage and standard deviation. This research was carried out for 2 months from June-August 2024.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What are the qualifications of caregivers/teachers handling pre-school children in private schools in Iwo Local Government? In order to answer this research question, data collected were subjected to frequency count and percentage.

Academic Qualifications/ Specialization.	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
NCE/B.Ed (ECE)	4	6.7
NCE/B.Ed (PES)	26	43.0
OND	4	6.7
HND	4	6.7
B. Sc	2	3.3
PGDE	-	-
OTHERS	20	33.3
TOTAL	60	100

Figure 1. Above showed that 4(6.7%) of caregivers were ECCE certificated, 26(43.0%) were NCE, B.Ed. (PES) holders, 4(6.7%) and 4(6.7 %) were ND and HND holder, 2(3.3%) are B.sc holder and 20(33.3%) had other education disciplines.

Research Question 2: What is the level of professionalism among the caregivers/teachers in the schools? In order to answer this research question, data collected were subjected to frequency count and percentage, mean and standard deviation.

S/N	Statement	Yes F %	No F %	Mean	SD
1.	Are you a member of any teachers' professional body?	28 46.7	32 53.3	1.53	.50
2.	If your answer is No to number 1, please indicate other professional body you belong to	-	-	3.00	.00
3.	Have you attended any form of training on literacy skills?	48 80	12 20	1.20	.40
4.	Have you participated in literacy communities or networks for continuous Professional Development?	40 66.7	20 43.7	1.33	.47
5.	Are you engaged in any ongoing professional learning on how to teach literacy skills at pre-school level?	14 23.3	46 76.7	1.77	.43
6.	Do you collaborate with colleagues to share ideas on instructional strategies and resources on teaching literacy skills?	56 93.3	4 6.6	1.07	.25
7.	Does your school organize seminars or trainings before resumption of a new session?	56 93.3	4 6.6	1.07	.25

Figure 2. The table above revealed that 28(46.7%) were registered under Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) while 32(53.3%) were not registered under any professional body, 48(80%) of caregivers/teachers attended training on literacy skills, 12(20%) didn't attend any professional literacy skills, 40(66.7%) were engaged in continuous professional development and 20(43.7%) didn't participate in literacy communities or networks for continuous professional development. In furtherance, it also revealed that 14 (23.3%) were engaged in an ongoing professional learning on how to teach literacy skills at pre-school level while 46(76.7%) were not engage in such. Similarly, 56(93.3%) collaborate with colleagues to share ideas on instructional strategies and resources on teaching literacy skills while 4(6.6%) didn't share their view of collaboration, 56(93.3%) of schools organize seminars or trainings before resumption of a new session while 4(6.6%) didn't organize seminars for teachers.

Research Question 3: What method of teaching are been applied by the caregivers/teachers to teach preschool literacy skills? In order to answer this research question, data collected were subjected to frequency count and percentage, mean and standard deviation.

S/N	Caregiver Instructional Methods of Teaching Literacy Skills	Always F	%	Rarely F	%	Sometimes F	%	Never F	%	Mean	SD
1	Do you incorporate phonemic awareness activities when teaching literacy?	10	16.7	24	40	26	43.3	-		2.27	.73
2.	Do you utilize and use word recognition strategies?	36	60	7	11.7	17	28.3	-		1.68	.89
3.	Do you make use of fluency- building practices when teaching literacy skills?	20	33.3	18	30	17	28.3	-		2.22	1.11
4.	Do you use interactive learning activities?	34	56.7	14	23.3	8	13.3	11	18.3	1.70	.94
5.	Do you provide literacy materials, resources and tasks that are age appropriate?	28	46.7	20	33.3	12	20	4	6.7	1.73	.78
6.	Do you always practice read aloud to children?	60	100	-		-		-		1.00	.00

Figure 3. This shows that 10(16.7%) always, 24(40%) rarely incorporate phonemic awareness activities when teaching literacy skills while 26(43.3%) sometimes incorporate it. Also, 36(60%) always and 7(11.7%) rarely utilize and use word recognition strategies, while 17(28.3%) sometimes use word recognition strategies, 20(33.3%) and 18(30%) always and rarely make use of fluency- building practices when teaching literacy skills while 17(28.3%) sometimes make use of it. However, 34(56.7%) and 14(23.3%) always and rarely use interactive learning activities while 8(13.3%) and 11(18.3%) sometimes and never use interactive learning activities. In the same vein, 28(46.7%) and 20(33.3%) always and rarely provide literacy materials, resources and tasks that are age appropriate while 12(20%) and 4(6.7%) sometimes and never provide it and lastly, 60(100%) always practice read aloud to children.

The findings on teachers' qualifications revealed that caregivers with ECCE certificate taking literacy skills in pre-school classes were very low, this could have implications on the quality of education and care provided to young children at their early stage of life, this findings was in-line with (Abunu, 2022) who submitted that unspecialized early childhood caregivers/teachers teaching preschool classes can lead into inadequate learning experiences, less effective developmental support, and potential safety concerns.

The findings further revealed that a significant number of teachers are not registered with the Teachers Registration Council (TRCN) and majority of them didn't belong to any professional bodies which would indicate a lack of formal recognition in the teaching profession. However, majority of the caregivers/ teachers are engaged in professional development which often organized by the school management, this is encouraging as it shows a commitment to ongoing

learning and improvement, this corroborate with (Asfaw & Sisay, 2022) who found out that teachers engaging in professional development can help to support the skill development and enhance learning outcome of the children in the ECCE center, it also agreed with the findings of (Arasomwan & Mashiy, 2021) who asserted that specialized training of early childhood educators' enhances their proficiencies.

The findings also revealed that low percentage of the caregivers always incorporate the use of phonemic awareness activities in teaching literacy skills, this outcome can affect the reading acquisition of young children and the reason could be that majority of the caregivers/teachers have little knowledge about phonemic awareness, this is in agreement with the study of (Serenje et al., 2020) who carried out studies on first- year teacher knowledge of phonemic awareness and its instruction and found out that majority of teachers lack knowledge of phonemic awareness instruction.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings in this study, it is evidence that there is low percentage of ECCE expert as caregivers/teachers in the preschool classes and also the method of teaching literacy skills in the preschool classes would have be of higher percentage if majority of caregivers/teacher are ECCE expert. However, majority of teachers/caregivers engaged in professional development and school organized seminars for their personal improvement. It can be concluded that majority of school proprietors didn't recruit professionals in the field of early childhood care and education as caregivers/teachers to teaching literacy skills in preschool classes.

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