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FREE PLAY AND PRESCHOOLERS' ACQUISITION OF ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS IN PUBLIC CARE CENTRES IN RIVERS STATE.

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Introduction

Watching a child grow while imbibing different skills is the dream of every caregiver. While living this dream, most of the caregivers fail to equip the preschool children with entrepreneurial skills that can help them in leading a successful life in future. The caregivers fail to develop entrepreneurial mindset in children at early ages especially in this time that giving children the type of education that prepares them for only white collar jobs has worsened situation. Caregivers do not realize that children learn quickly at

Abstract

Entrepreneurship is one of the factors that influences the economy of a nation, either directly or indirectly. It is a fact that entrepreneurship plays a significant part in shaping the landscape of a country's economy. This paper, therefore, seeks to discuss play and public care centre preschoolers' acquisition of entrepreneurial skills in Rivers State. Two research questions and two corresponding hypotheses guided this study. The design of the study is correlational research design. The population of the study comprised of all the 3,489 Nursery three pupils in Rivers State. The sample of the study comprised 350 Nursery three drawn from the population of the study, using simple sampling method. The instrument

Used for the study is the “Play and Preschoolers’ Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition Checklist” (PPESAC). It was face validated by three experts. Pearson Product Moment Coefficient (PPMC) was used to compute the reliability of the instrument which had a reliability index of 0.72.

Keywords: Preschoolers’ Acquisition, Entrepreneurial, Public, Centres.

Tender age. It is surprising to see caregivers with all the different kinds of life experiences, refuse to identify that children have enough time to implement and experience what they learn at young age. The preschool children are neither allowed to play in the sand nor encouraged to create and build knowledge. Preschool curriculum remains the same without the consciousness that the best curriculum today may not serve the nation’s purpose tomorrow. The curriculum practice is still full of rote learning whereas rote learning inhibits creativity. Hellson (2017) stated that any country which does not recognize the entrepreneurial skills of children through play activities will depend on foreign talents. If the children’s acquisition of entrepreneurial skills is still handled with a wave of the hand, it means there may not be a bright future.

The future of any country rests in the creativity of the citizenry. Our political leaders, administrators and policymakers are very much worried about the oil, they talk about the energy crises and neglect the most important aspect of natural/acquired resources - the creative children who are our potential leaders in all avenues of life-entrepreneurship, scientific and technological education. This is not far from Singh (2015) who stated that countries without creative talents cannot raise standard of living among nations of the world not just economically but educationally as well. If any country does not comprehend the economic implications of neglecting the preschool children’s entrepreneurial skills acquisition, the country is bound to depend on foreign loans and talents. Without equipping the children with skills that can make them independent, employers of labour, creators of wealth, inventors, business tycoons, countries, even with great reserves of natural resources would not enjoy good standard of living. The country and her citizens would ever be backward. Nigeria as a country, especially Rivers State desperately needs entrepreneurial skills that can solve the problems of unemployment, poverty and underdevelopment yet does not realise that the solutions lie in

the preschool children's acquisition of entrepreneurial skills. This has posed a great concern to many.

Many people have become worried with what the children are learning at school, following the trend of failure of children being educated for future self-reliance. Rules and regulations kill creativity. It often teaches the children not to think differently but how to follow instructions and obey the status quo. Nigeria among the nations of the world is now heavily saddled with the problem of unemployment especially Rivers State that is highly populated because of its oil activities. Many tertiary institutions in the country have continued to produce a huge number of graduates who would continue to look forward to white - collar jobs. Presently we have graduates who have no form of entrepreneurship or skills acquisition training, moving from one office to the other in search of employment. Some of them who have remained unemployed for years after graduation, have continued to rely on the supports of their families and loved ones. Others have taken up demeaning jobs, which do not befit their certificates, just to make ends meet. Changing the trend would mean changing the orientation of preschool children and not even from the primary or secondary school level. The children are supposed to be equipped with entrepreneurship skills that will make them become their own bosses and employers of labour rather than searching and waiting endlessly for jobs in the labour market like it is at the present.

The present government has introduced National School Entrepreneurship Programme (N-SEP) launched at Abuja but preschoolers are not included. The development of entrepreneurial mindsets among preschoolers in Rivers State is very important in preparation for improving employment generation. Generational paradigm shift is needed. There should be a mindful of the paradigm shift in today's preschool programme. It should no longer be "go to school, get a good grade and work in a reputable organization". It should now be "go to school and acquire the skills that will enable you to start your own business ". To change the mindset of a people, catch them young at the preschool age. If you want to re-orientate a people, catch them young at the preschool age. The truth is that any training done when the child is old instead of starting early enough at the Preschool age is "medicine after death ". According to Luke (2016) people claim that if there is anything that requires quite a tedious effort, it is the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills.

The acquisition of entrepreneurial skills may require quite a tedious and an unrelenting effort promoted by constant practice and determination but the seed of mastery is embedded in every child. The germination has been blocked due to inadequate play. The children at this level go to school just to fulfill their parental biddings and desires, yet even when they demonstrate the willingness to go to school, the dispositions of teaching and learning of the school which do not make room for adequate play scare the children. Play can influence children's acquisition of entrepreneurial skills either positively or negatively. Children do things which ordinarily no one could visualize they can do. Therefore, we can give preschool a new meaning and a new orientation that would lead to optimum entrepreneurial skills acquisition, if the emphasis is shifted from routine type of teaching and learning to paying attention to adequate play. It is an underscore to say that children's acquisition of entrepreneurial skills can be best achieved through play.

Play is that "magical" activity which inspires wondrous feats of imagination and creativity among children. Children learn generally through play across cultures. Children quickly engage in play with materials available to the extent that they forget to eat wherever they happen to be. In every play activity, a great deal of learning takes place. A child spotted to be very quiet gives a signal and an indication that something is wrong somewhere. This is the reason Ndifon (2015) suggested that play is an excellent activity for proper development of the child. It is doing things for amusement with somebody or something. Play is the universal language of childhood. It is through play that children understand one another and make sense of the world around them. Children learn so much from play. Play is also the medium through which children learn to understand the world around them. Children are little playing machines; instinctively they play from when they are little babies. They play with whatever is to hand, from a muddy puddle and a few stones to a complex interactive video game. Play is vital to the development and well-being of all children. Play is the way that all children learn about themselves and the world in which they live. A child is calm and satisfied after a good session of play. The child often experiences deep distress if play is disrupted. The child experiences frustrations if the environment is too strict and he feels tortured. Such a child may begin to torture others. There are different types of play such as free play.

Free play is unstructured, voluntary, child-initiated, activity that allows children to develop their imaginations while exploring and experiencing the world around them. During free play, children play at their own pace and also use materials and equipment in their own way. Free play could be called unstructured play. Unstructured play means open-ended, or creative free play with endless possibilities. It is child led and directed, and does not require an outcome or product - playing in the home corner; free construction with blocks, painting on blank paper; or getting creative with various recycled materials. The children can make paper kites, build houses and canoes with sand and draw various objects to their satisfaction. Unstructured play provides children with experiences in creativity, imagination, decision-making and the development of overall emotional and social skills. Tassoni (2016) stated that, "children tend to concentrate and persevere for long periods when they are 'in control' of their learning. Their levels of motivation are higher because they have chosen something that appeals to them. Again they freely choose what they want to do and how it should be done. This accounts for Ndako and Bright (2015) who asserted that free play is the spontaneous play that comes naturally from children's natural curiosity, love discovery and enthusiasm. Free play is crucial for children during early years. According to Emma (2016) free play is described as children choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else. Free play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult imposed curriculum. Although adults usually provide the space and resources for free play and might be involved, the child takes the lead and the adults respond to cues from the child. When it comes to free play, the concept of choice is crucial. This does not mean that there should be an absence of boundaries. Required boundaries need to be managed taking into consideration first and foremost the importance of children's need to choose their own play and making sure that this is facilitated. It is important to note that free play does not include time with electronics, such as the television, video games, or computer. Free play is a tool for developing the child as a whole. True free play is child initiated, spontaneous and guided by the child's imagination without the direction of an adult. Play helps children more when there is a mix of free and socio-dramatic play. Free play naturally draws out the children's creativity.

Creativity is required to succeed in life. Children are born creative and given the right environment for play and with the right creative tools and training everyone can tap into this innate talent. There are various activities that can stimulate creativity in preschool children. Philip (2012) opined that play is prominent for high entrepreneurial skills acquisition such as creativity. Also, Michael (2013) asserted that classroom engagement be reduced for the children to have time for creativity whereas Willington (2014) explained that Creativity arises in collaboration with team work; creativity is not necessarily just a solo effort only. Play activities like sand play, drawing play, gardening, drawing, music, dance, clay modeling, paper folding, etc. develop creativity in preschool children. Society and technology continue to evolve and progress. It is more crucial now than ever to teach children how to be creative. Help your children think outside the normal parameters by giving them room to play and explore. In fact, allowing them the freedom to create their own stories and narratives can help them become all round better creators. The basic components of the creative process are involved in play. It generates new experimentation, possibilities, and exploration of unlimited fantasy and reality. Play is crucial for the development of a healthy personality. These suggest that learning should not be tied to the classroom. Creativity needs to be nurtured in the children. This trend has to change for self-confidence. Self-confidence is a key entrepreneurial skill for success. Self-confidence is concerned with how a person feels about his ability. A self-confident child believes in his abilities. He is not scared to explore his environment, take risk and take difficult decisions. Some of the traits found in a self-confident child are boldness to make friends with new pupils, accepting corrections, ability to receive visitors, ability to report noise makers in the class and possession of argumentative power. This could manifest during drama, rhythmic dance, delivering a message from his parents to the teacher or even defending himself if falsely accused. Udeme (2013) suggested the magic of free play in building self-confidence is better seen than imagined. Dayo (2013) added that there is higher self-confidence among the children exposed to free play in the use of school facilities than those not given free hand. Chukwuma (2013) said that there is no association between free play and self-confidence. A child who would be a future successful entrepreneur starts to exhibit the trait of self-confidence, believing in his abilities early enough. Self-confidence is the biggest entrepreneurial asset. It is a feeling of trust in one's abilities, qualities,

and judgement. This is not far-fetched from what Psychology Dictionary Online (2015) which opines that self-confidence is an individual's trust in his or her own abilities, capacities and judgments, or belief that he or she can successfully face day to day challenges and demands. A child who possesses self-confidence seems to be happier. Typically, when children are confident in their abilities, they become happier due to their successes. Also, when they are feeling better about their capabilities, the more energized and motivated they are to take action and achieve their goals. This agrees with Reuben (2015) who submits that self-confidence is a good feeling about yourself and your capabilities. So, if the preschool child is a self-confident person, it simply means that he feels good about who he is and his ability to achieve things he wants to achieve. In fact, it is better to identify and develop self-confidence if the children have to engage in entrepreneurial skills

Entrepreneurial skills are the basic skills necessary to enable an individual start, develop, finance and succeed in his own enterprise. Entrepreneurial skills challenge children to think outside the box, create unique solutions and become leaders at an early age. These are skills that suggest to the children at their tender age the concept of economic independence. These skills could be in different areas such as, storytelling, composition, modelling, football playing, colouring to mention just a few. They are skills needed for success in business, most especially in teaching as in consultancy outfit. It shows that the children are business tycoons in the making. The process could end in a market day either organized within the school or the community market day, where the kids sell their products to real customers. In the nearest future. The children develop passions for something, turn it into a business and before you know it, they are supporting themselves, the family and the society at large. The idea for the business should be theirs, not the caregivers'. Nothing shuts a child down faster than being told what to do, so let the children come up with their own ideas. Then support and encourage them, being the voice of reason when necessary. This would give rise to diverse entrepreneurial skills.

Skill acquisition is a key, which opens all doors. Skill acquisition is the ability to be trained on a particular task or function and become expert in it. It is a pity that there is "huge" parading of unemployment in many parts of the world today especially in Nigeria. Nowadays there are many unemployed graduates in the world. The problem is hidden in the education system- lack

of skills of students and lack of desire to teach the children something new and to improve current knowledge. It is time for the preschool children to be equipped with new skills other than cognitive skills. No wonder Kelly (2016) opined that skill acquisition is the ability to create new skills, refine them through practice and apply them in new contexts. The preschool child viewed as being capable of acquiring cognitive skills for his present and future survival can equally be guided to acquire skills that will make him a boss of his own in future without “white slavery” in the form of white-collar job which remains a problem.

Statement of the Problem

Preschool children's acquisition of entrepreneurial skills is not given the priority it deserves and this has made children to grow into adulthood lacking creativity and self-confidence. A visit to the preschool centres in Rivers State reveals that children do not engage in adequate play. Our educational system has failed to prepare the children for the future self-reliance or independence. Despite the importance attached to preschool by the nation, the sub - sector is the worst hit by government's negligence. The preschool children are deprived of play time being occupied with academic activities in a manner that the children do not engage in play as a testing ground for life. The Preschool children are still being prepared for white collar jobs instead of creativity and self - confidence. Even where they have playgrounds most of the public preschools co-exist with the primary and junior secondary schools. In the private sector, the minders are attached to supervise the children during play. This means that the minders initiate the play, detect the tone of the play and settle conflicts among the children. The preschool children are not made to realize that the world is full of ideas and they could be the people that can generate the ideas in future in their families or as officials in the government. Therefore the problem of this study is to establish if there is any relationship between play and preschoolers’ acquisition of entrepreneurial skills in public care centres in Rivers State in order to proffer solutions to the preschoolers’ acquisition of entrepreneurial skills while allowing them enough time for play.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between free play and preschoolers’ acquisition of entrepreneurial skills in public care centres in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- i. Determine the relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity.
- ii. Determine the relationship between free play and preschoolers' self-confidence.

Research Questions

The following questions were answered in the study:

- i. What is the relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity?
- ii. What is the relationship between free play and preschoolers' self-confidence?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the research:

Ho₁. There is no significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity.

Ho₂. There is no significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' self - confidence.

Research method

The study was a correlational study due to the fact that it sought to ascertain the relationship between play and preschoolers' acquisition of entrepreneurial skills in Rivers State. The population of the study comprised all the Nursery 3 (Transitional class) pupils for the 2018 /2019 session in the eight (8) Local Government Areas of Rivers State. There are two hundred and forty six (246) Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) centres in the sampled schools of Rivers State with a total enrollment of three thousand, four hundred and eight-nine (3,489) preschoolers (RSUBEB, 2018). The sample of this study consisted of 350 preschoolers, about 10% of the population. In order to sample the 350 preschoolers, 25 Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) centres were selected, using purposive sampling method. The 25 Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) centres represented 10% of the Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) centres in the study area. Fourteen (14) preschoolers were used in each of the selected centres. The researcher adopted simple random sampling method of balloting and replacement to select the preschoolers. In the

balloting, numbers were written on papers, enfolded, scuffled and placed in a dish. The instruments used to gather data for the study was a 20 item structured checklist entitled “Play and Preschoolers’ Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition Checklist” (PPESAC). The Checklist was scaled using 4-point scale of Very Correct (4), Correct (3), Sometimes Correct (2) and Correct (1). VC C SC NC 4 3 2 1

The rating used VC, C, SC, and NC. The “Play and Preschoolers’ Entrepreneurial Skills Acquisition Checklist” (PPESAC) was validated by three experts in the department of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Primary Education Studies (PES) in Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Rivers State. The reliability index of the (PPESAC) was 0.72. The test and retest method was adopted to determine the reliability of the study. The researcher administered the checklist on the subjects in a school with similar attributes as schools which were used for the main study. After two weeks, the same instrument was administered again to the same group. The two sets of scores were calculated for correlation using Pearson Product Moment Coefficient (r) in order to determine the consistency level of the instrument at 0.05 error limit. When the reliability index is above 0.50 then the instrument is reliable but when the index is below 0.50, then the instrument is unreliable. Therefore, the instruments is reliable. The researcher first of all, went to the preschool centres for permission to use the schools for the research from the appropriate authority. This is to establish good rapport and choose dates and time for the administration of the checklist on the subjects. The researcher went to the designated centres with six research assistants for the administration. The subjects were given two weeks to respond to the items after which the checklist was collected. Pearson Product Moment Coefficient (PPMC) was used to analyse the research questions and testing the null hypotheses.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between free play and preschoolers’ creativity?

Table 1: Summary of PPMC test of relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity.

Variables	Σx	Σy	Σx^2	Σy^2	Σxy	r-cal	r-crit	Dec
Free play	1767		8585					Sig.
					6346	0.8013		
preschoolers' creativity		1813		9247				

The result of table 1 showed an r- value of 0.8013. This indicated that there was a significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between free play and preschoolers' self-confidence?

Table 2: Summary of PPMC test of relationship between free play and preschoolers' self - confidence.

Variables	Σx	Σy	Σx^2	Σy^2	Σxy	r-cal	r-crit	Dec
Free play	1465		6331					Sig.
					7642	0.923		
preschoolers' self confidence		1813		9247				

The result of table 2 showed an r- value of 0.923. This indicated that there was a significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' self - confidence.

Discussion

The study discovered a significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity. The result of the study could be attributed to the fact that children are freer when they choose their play and set their rules. This result agrees with the study of Philip (2012) who opined that play is prominent for high entrepreneurial skills acquisition such as creativity. Also, it is in line with the study of Michael (2013) who asserted that classroom engagement be reduced for the children to have time for creativity through

play whereas it is not in agreement with the study of Willington (2014) who explained that Creativity arises in collaboration with team work; creativity is not necessarily just a solo effort only.

The study also discovered a significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' self-confidence. This could be attributed to the fact that children engage in pretend play when they play on their own. This result is supported by the studies of Udeme (2013) who said that the magic of free play in building self-confidence is better seen than imagined and Dayo (2013) who affirmed that there is higher self-confidence among the children exposed to free play than those not given free hand. However, the result is not in consonance with the study of Chukwuma (2013) who said that there is no association between free play and self-confidence.

Summary of major findings

Major findings were made from the analyses of the data collated for the study as follows:

- i. Free play has a correlation with preschoolers' creativity.
- ii. Free play has a correlation with preschoolers' self – confidence.

Conclusion

- i. There was a significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' creativity. This could be like this because during free play, children play at their own pace and also use materials and equipment in their own way. It is unstructured, voluntary, child-initiated, activity that allows children to develop their imaginations while exploring and experiencing the world around them.
- ii. There was a significant relationship between free play and preschoolers' self – confidence. This is not a surprise because during free play, children develop some of the traits of self-confident such as boldness to make friends with new pupils, accepting corrections, ability to receive visitors, ability to report noise makers in the class and possession of argumentative power. This could manifest during drama, rhythmic dance, delivering a message from his parents to the teacher or even defending himself if falsely accused.

Educational Implications

Based on the recommendations above, few educational implications are identified as follows:

- Caregivers have to allow pupils engage in free play to help them become creative to avoid being prepared for white collar jobs only.
- Caregivers should focus on helping the preschoolers acquire self-confidence by exposing to free play. This will help the children to be self-employed and also become employers of labour in their adulthood.

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