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**SUSTAINING CHILD'S SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR IMPROVED GENDER
DEVELOPMENT IN RIVERS STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The environment has often been accepted as a major determinant of individual characteristics, and the outcome of specific situations. So much as nothing exist in a vacuum, the child from whom starts the multiplication of humanity, requires a planned and viable environment for the proper nurturing of his potentialities. The paper therefore examines the major types of environment, characteristics of an environment, importance of a conducive environment, hazards of an unsuitable environment, general influences of an environment and the implication for gender development in Rivers State. In addition, the paper recommends that the child's school environment should be gender friendly for inclusive improvement of both sexes. Maintaining the child's education at the foundation would create a required environment for the child at home and the effective teaching/learning process in the school environment for improved gender contribution in the nation.

Keywords: Environment, the child's school, gender development

Introduction

The beginning is a world void of form. It is common to say that nothing exist in a vacuum. A vacuum could be compared to emptiness, a space in which there is neither form, air, nor the likeness of anything that could be described. Philosophically, it could rather be expressed as an environment of emptiness, air tight without any visible classification of animate or inanimate habitation. In Christian religion, God the master creator of the environment in Genesis 1:1 – 31 recorded the understanding that the environment is created out of emptiness, yet this vacuum could exist in an environment.

A couple of lines of thought see an environment, as Fleming (2013) described, it is an aspect of the field in which an individual functions. Park & Allaby (2013) opined that, the environment is the aggregate surrounding of things both biotic and a-biotic and the condition that influences the life of an individual or an organism, or population including humans. Storksdieck (2011) describes an environment as both physical and social surrounding of man which has an influence on growth and individual character. Irrespective of what an environment would mean to an average man, Ebbeck & Ebbeck (2002) maintained that, the child's environment is what it is for the child. He explained that the environment would differ

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from child to child, and become more different from the environment the teacher knows and understands. He therefore stressed that the environment to the child is a largely undifferentiated whole. The child's environment is one big bubbling whole which compasses everything. The child's entire environment which is the whole world as he sees it becomes far richer and more complex as he grows. There is seen suddenly no division between his social, scientific and mathematic environment.

An environment therefore is an inextinguishable phenomenon with an ambiguous characteristic, having specific natural and human amenities, defending, conditioning and influencing the total behaviour of individuals within that surrounding. The environment could only be retained and maintained by procreation and the child is a product of procreation. The child is the most important personality in the existence of mankind in the global environment. Without a suitable environment for the child, the entire human race would be driven into a disorganized, educationally deprived, unpleasant and socially maladjusted collection of adults. The primary school which according to Page, Thomas, & Marshall (2008) is a maintained school for pupils in the age range from 5 to 11years plus, requires a proper learning environment for a better and organized tomorrow.

Classification of the child's environment

An environment could be classified as either conducive or unsuitable. All situations, practices, and even experiences of common identity fall under either of these classifications. Some of these conditions exist within the physical, social, economic, agricultural and of course the academic environment. An unsuitable environment could be referred to as a life in a vacuum which is traumatic and stressful especially for the child. The child's basic occupation is play. He learns better by satisfying his curiosity while trying to discover. Well of course learning is established by discovery of what is taught verbally and theoretically. The child also easily accumulates knowledge by imitation of general behavioural characteristics in his immediate environment. The first environment of the child is the mother's womb. Any form of irregularity from the mother's health, diet, emotional state and even her age would cause life time damage to the unborn child. An unsuitable learning environment right from the home like the womb could begin to lay a poor academic foundation for the child before school age. When the home environment loses its warmth, comfort and encouragement, it also loses its status as a home and becomes a house, or den in which the child is exposed to quarrelling, fighting and shock. The child begins to grow up lacking proper orientation to love and appreciate. The home environment in some cases could be congested. Peters (2011) is of the opinion that homes of a large percentage of the population around the world are so drab and cramped that the child is not provided with a rich and varied enough environment for the required early development.

At school, the child is as vital as the education given to him-early childhood or primary education. Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) recognized primary education as the foundation to the success or failure of other levels of education. As the child is the foundation to the growth and maintenance process of humanity, whatsoever happens to the child and the education he receives would affect the entire larger environment. A quick glance into most of our state primary school environment would reveal an absence of learning materials for both staff and pupils. Most schools even lack the ordinary chalk and black boards not to mention markers and white boards. The child sits and writes on the floor. Right now we could record

more than 2/3 of Nigerian children in families that are still out of school. A few are in private schools. While most are on the streets as hawkers. This could be blamed on the unsuitable learning environment, inconsistent running of the school programmes, with an accompanying and severe economic situation. If early learning as Peters (2011) saw it is as decisive as psychologist maintain, then a strong case could be made for removing children as early as possible for part of the day from such an impoverished environment. Peters (2011) added that the harsh reality in the primary school is that classes are well over forty and premises are cramped.

The primary school environment has deteriorated so much that it does not suit, nor even help today's children to advance intellectually and socially into a demanding world of science and technology. Tanner (1961) in Gammage (2012) observed that children today grow bigger than they were twenty-years ago and they are maturing faster. A child of five now is in all physical and probably a good many psychological respects equivalent to a child of eight of thirty years ago. This progressively earlier maturity in children through generations requires a suitable and progressively well-equipped primary school environment, not an encasement of trained teachers and pupils without adequate teaching and learning materials.

The first stage of education which last from the age six to eleven, is basically concerned with the child's discovery ability and attitude to the world around him. Peters (2011) identified this stage as the stage for "...concept formation and the development of the categorical apparatus". This he explained is the sequence by which children ask questions. For example, what is this? Where is it? When did it happen? Why did it happen? As children are exposed to learning in an unsuitable environment, they could only receive mostly unsuitable responses to their questions. Yet Peters (2011) warned that children emotional and social development would be stunted if adequate and correct answers are not given in response to their questions.

Hazards of unsuitable environment

An unsuitable environment would obstruct generally individual child's functioning abilities. When the child's academic needs are not met, and he is daily exposed to an unsuitable learning environment, too unhealthy for educational advancement, then the child would develop negative attitude towards life. He would not trust his environment and could acquire and exhibit antisocial and maladjusted behaviour against himself and his fellow man. Schools therefore that endure learning in an unsuitable environment, without stimulating and interactive activities for children would as Ryan and Cooper (2012) put it, continue to produce discontented pupils. The end product of an unsuitable environment would be an aggressively groomed child who would simply sprout out to be the sun going through unnecessary rigours to live an unconditioned lifestyle unacceptable totally to societal norms.

A Conducive learning environment

When an environment expresses the ability of maintaining life by providing such life sustaining amenities like – water, food, clothing, shelter, light, good health facilities, proper and safe recreation and desirable education and materials to reinforce it, giving room for total advancement of each individual, such an environment is referred to as conducive. Most importantly every environment has a unique common characteristic – air. A conducive learning environment therefore should have all life sustaining amenities and every major material for the continuity of the effective teaching and learning process. Peters (2011) specified that the school environment must provide facilities for intelligent and articulate adults to supervise the exploratory and linguistic

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activities of children, for plenty of talk and enriched experience. The child's manipulative and exploratory activity in a conducive learning environment would equip him with the concept he requires at the primary stage. Thus Barrow (2006) recommended a conducive learning environment for the child as it makes room for individual creativity. It is desirable to promote creativity in children, by emphasizing quality and originality in an environment filled with necessary learning materials. Creativity we must agree develops the total child. The children could through creativity produce viable learning materials within the classroom. Stone and Quinn (1972) opined that the child is capable of developing his school environment; his contribution would hopefully produce a generation motivated to and capable of rebuilding his nation. We should therefore produce a child centred learning environment. Peters (2011) hence stated the function of the educator as either to provide a conducive environment in which this individual development can proceed or to intervene more actively and implant the appropriate ideas in the mind of the child in accordance with some carefully articulated programmes.

The child's learning environment

An educated child is an asset to his nation and the nucleus of a surviving learning environment. Ebbeck & Ebbeck (2002) described the home environment is "warm and understanding". At home where the mothers play the paramount role of educating the child, the home environment should be as comforting and peaceful as expected. The child establishes a condition of living at home before school age. In addition to personal hygiene he learns to grow in the respect and fear of God, with an accompanying regard and appreciation for parents and his teachers at school. The home environment creates a proper platform on which the school environment is set up. Whatever goes wrong at the home environment could affect the child's learning at the school. The mothers therefore are the brain behind a successful home/school environment for the child. The paper though is not exonerating fathers from the upbringing of their children but rather stressing the hypersensitive role of mothers in the creating of a conducive environment for the child, preparing him for an enjoyable and enviable adulthood tomorrow.

At school, the child experiences an exact transfer and application of routine practices at home as they are being conceptualized in class. There is now a better understanding of life and what is expected of an individual in the maintenance of a good school environment. A conducive environment is a basic requisite for a better primary school programme for the child. An ideal suitable leaning environment should have a well-equipped classroom space, appropriate teaching aids, workshop, good teachers and reliable laboratory for scientific discovery, a library and a safe recreation ground for meaningful play. These would be directed towards the accomplishment of a well-planned curriculum. Without such environment, learning for the child becomes invariably frustrating with much hard work directed towards attaining little success. On the reverse, examination malpractices and cultism within the educational sector generally could be on the increase. These social vices are many of what parents protect children against in the society.

Maintaining a conducive environment

Hagen (2006) maintained that education is a continuous process therefore it is the responsibility of a number of people. The task of maintaining a conducive environment for the child could not be accomplished by just an individual, or the government alone, or by the scientific implementation of any alien force, but rather by the sincere contribution of every individual within the holistic class. All involved must as a point of urgency through routine contribution satisfy the demands of what is expected of him no matter how small.

Beginning from the home, parents should give their children good home foundation, aiding them develops better focus of life. The schools on the other hand should direct the children's focus of life towards the practical acquisition of life skills under the guidance of a good teacher. Hagen (2006) described a "good" teacher as a teacher who facilitates learning effectively and efficiently in such a manner that the learner expresses and exhibits a desire to continue development and engagement with the learning opportunities available to him.

It is the responsibility of the government to provide, maintain and motivate the success of the intension of both parents, teachers and the nation, by –providing facilities, equipment, creating incentives, regularly updating teachers rewards, maintaining a consistently acceptable school system, helping educators appreciate and identify some dignity in labour yearly through assessment and training, and monitoring the results of input and the ability of the output. If the government could fulfil all her promises in the National policy on education for primary schools with her intensions constantly read out on news, acknowledging that education is a serious business, the problems of the child's school environment could have been solved and excellence achieved. However, empowering women and developing gender specifically in enforcing the education of the child would make this possible. The responsibilities of the government seem challenging though, but we must note that the government constitutes you and the author, the teachers, parents, that man and woman in the car, bus, taxi, walking in the street. With all hands on deck the ship would be ready to sail towards the accomplishment of a successful academic environment for the child, the most viable leader of tomorrow.

General influence of the environment

Dewey (2011) informed that the environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder; stimulate or inhibit the characteristic activities of a living being. An environment could influence a child's total behaviour whether it is conducive or unsuitable. The child responds easily to the demand of his environment and attitude of those around him. We could overlook specific common habits among adults exhibited in the presence of a child, but the child could imitate and later practice with the conviction that it is good, because he saw an adult do it with ease in the physical environment. For example, smoking, liquor consumption, fighting and of course stealing. Ryan & Cooper (2012) though accepted that the environment could deeply influence an individual's capacity to learn, Leonard in Ryan & Cooper (2012) stated that no environment can strongly affect a person unless it is strongly interactive. It is worth reckoning that gender development makes the environment strongly interactive.

The child in the primary school would easily be influenced by the physically stimulated environment of the school. The content of the classroom should be able to inform the child of the worth of the educational business ahead of him. The classroom teacher whose primary function is to interact meaningfully with the child could perform poorly if the environment does not have the necessary media materials, organization and management skills to facilitate learning. The child's peers could also serve as a major source of influence on his social constitution. All the same, Howe (1976) stressed that, differences in learning between individuals are compounded by the fact that the impact of learning is cumulative. Environmental cumulative influences are seen as having a "snow-balling" effect. A minor initial occurrence could lead to another, which could produce another and so on. There is in fact no limit to the influence in an environment, but an activity based curriculum with relevant materials would influence the child in a more acceptable manner.

Implications for gender development

A major implication of this perspective is that children's appreciation of – and adherence to – gender roles is dependent on their gender identity, their sense of being male or female. Parpart, Connelly & Barriteau (2000) explained that Kohlberg and other proponents of this approach argued that children develop a sense of gender identity in a sequence of distinct stages, an idea that owes a great deal to Jean Piaget's influential work on cognitive development. Piaget had argued that children's logical thought could be seen to develop through a sequence of discrete stages, each qualitatively different from the others. Kohlberg connected this development with growth in children's sense of gender identity. Kohlberg's theory of gender and identity development involves three stages. These include, *Gender labelling which occurs when* children can identify themselves and other people as girls or boys. For *stability* children recognize that gender is stable over time and that one day, boys will grow up to be daddies, and girls will grow up to be mummies. Finally, *Gender consistency is identified when* children have a full appreciation of the permanence of gender over time and the roles of sexes in situations.

The research literature provides some support for the notion that more advanced gender concepts are associated with selective attention to same-sex models. The classic study of Martin, Ruble & Szkrybalo (2002) assessed children's understanding of gender as a fixed, unchanging attribute using a structured gender concept interview. Children's responses to the questions seemed to support Kohlberg's sequence of gender identity development. Furthermore, the children who demonstrated an appreciation of the stability of gender were more likely than children with a less mature gender concept to attend to the same-sex model on a videotape that depicted both male and female models within the same learning environment.

The child's school environment therefore encompasses a broad range of educational concepts directly contributing to gender development. Researchers are interested in relationships between environment constructs and multiple outcomes, including learning, engagement, motivation, social relationships, and group dynamics. Bronfenbrenner (2009) recognized that behaviour is a function of people's personal characteristics and their environment therefore physical setting, the psychological environment creates social contexts, and numerous instructional components related to teacher characteristics and behaviours.

Schools play an important part in teaching, modeling, and reinforcing gender roles. Sex education is best taught from the primary school so that the child would grow up sexually well adjusted. Gender roles are well interpreted practiced and understood exclusive of culture and tradition in the school environment. Behavior development is embedding in the school curriculum and each child establishes tolerable characters for adulthood. Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan (2007) found that classrooms with highly cooperative gender groups appear to have students with more positive perceptions of fairness in grading, stronger class cohesion, and higher degree of social support, as well as higher achievement scores. The primary school environment tends to use collaborative strategies more frequently and have higher levels of teacher involvement and support than is found in other school levels. Classroom management, management and organization also impacts pupils' perceptions of the teacher. Moos

(2010) observed that teachers of both sexes work more effectively with more pupils in a class of gender friendly schools than with less pupils that are exclusively male or female.

Part of the larger focus on school improvement is school climate or educational climate, which defines how teachers interact with each other and with administrators. Hammond & Branford (2012) described that this difference in classroom climate, which identifies relationships among students with each other, the teacher and how this translates into learning should be gender oriented. The environment should intentionally provide organizational instruction at the start of the academic year as a characteristic of an effective classroom environment for meaningful gender development else the school environment will create room for bizarre learning. Beyond the physical arrangement of a classroom a psychological environment is also created, based on the interaction of key players in the classroom, namely pupils and teachers. Most importantly, the classroom environment must project a gender accommodating physical environment as this could influence behavioral and academic outcomes more.

Recommendations

So much as the environment is made up of human and natural causes; it could also be affected by both classes. Individuals in an environment for example could through deforestation, alter the entire natural vegetation in a natural environment. In the same manner, natural disaster like earth quake, flood and haematin could abuse and re-allocate the entire human created environment. Teachers could completely mar the child's learning by teaching him the wrong concepts. The two factors in the genetic origin of an environment are inseparable. The paper hence, recommends a check and balance of both causes of environmental disorders, so that their adverse effects could be monitored and properly directed to maintain a conducive environment for gender development. The child's school environment must be gender friendly as it is coeducational. This intention though could only be successfully implemented if started from the foundation where both sexes are first educated which is in the child's school.

Classrooms should be generally networked, expanding environment beyond physical walls, enabling children to interact via email, video conferencing, and blogs. Learning about factors that may shape pupils' perceptions of their learning environment, how teachers' actions appear to children of both sexes, and how changes made to the learning environment may stimulate and encourage learning should continue to be of the utmost importance to the classroom teachers for gender development from the foundation.

The primary school environment is the very first industry in which the child, who later grows into an adult, is groomed towards a better, developed, reliable and self-sustained democratic individual. This stage of the child's education is quite invaluable. Any disorder at this level could lead to a vicious circle for the maintenance of an unsuitable environment. The paper though is not recommending the implementation of universal basic education programme as a panacea for the sustenance of a conducive environment, but rather emphasizes here that, the child to whom primary education is being first administered to, would grow into the same worried and financially frustrated adult even today; if the primary school is not properly equipped for both sexes to adjust meaningfully to handle adult challenges.

Conclusion

Nobody lives outside any environment. So much as it is impossible to separate from oneself it is also impossible to dissect oneself from his immediate environment. Though an environment could sometimes be unsuitable; the focus of mankind should be to build a lasting and dependable conducive environment. This intention would only be successful if the child, the beginning of mankind is properly educated in a conducive school environment. The child would hence establish the idea and concept of a comfortably necessary environment outside the school when he graduates which will permit proper gender interaction.

Whatever the child's environment turns out to be later, he is optimistic about the future, because he has learnt a lot about the world while in school interacting with the same people he will confront in the later society. Nigeria though could be classified as implementing unstable educational programmes, yet she has trained out graduates in different professions from her poorly equipped institutions; most of whom have even mastered their careers and acquired doctorate degrees with the ambition of professors, professing to solve specific problems in the society by taking academic risk, gathering data to answer the how's, what's and whys of general maladjustment in our society, including the author, we would yet not deny the fact that we are faced with the shame of a society that regards the children less, in the midst of the same society that has enough of everything for everybody's needs, but not enough for everybody's greed. Let us go back where we fell, to rebuild our environment again. As it appears, we fell from the beginning, and the beginning is the child; my child, your child, our children in inadequately organized primary school environment. In the building of the child's suitable learning environment, that is where we have fallen, we should go back before tomorrow would be the same today we were worried about yesterday. A suitable academic environment for the school child is an ideal critical concern for educationist in this millennium. If the secondary and tertiary institutions need extra attention the primary schools require more careful attentions without which the higher institutions of learning would cease to exist and gender functions and development would become a danger to society.

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