

Assessment of Health Status, Safety and Child-Friendly Environment of Pre-Primary Schools in Lagos State

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Abstract

Parents at different times have expressed worries at health hazards, safety and child-friendly environment and other dangerous experiences of their children at various schools and centres. Thus, this study aimed at assessing compliance with national minimum benchmark for health, safety and child-friendliness of pre-primary schools and child care centres. The study was conducted using descriptive survey design with direct observation of prevailing situations. Sixty (60) pre-primary schools were purposively selected across three contiguous local government areas in Lagos West Senatorial District. School Observation Checklist ($r = 0.91$) was used for data collection. Data gathered were analysed using frequency, percentages, median, standard deviation and t-test at 0.05 level of significance. The results revealed that the health status, safety and child-friendliness of pre-primary schools in Lagos State were unsatisfactory (Grand median = 2) in terms of compliance with prescribed minimum benchmarks. There was a significant difference in health status ($t = 4.564$), safety ($t = 5.347$) and child-friendliness ($t = 4.310$) between private and public pre-primary schools and it was in favour of private schools. In conclusion, pre-primary schools in Lagos State did not satisfy the minimum benchmark of standard required to implement preschool curriculum in terms of safety measures, healthy environment and child-friendliness. Strong socio-economic will on the part of proprietors towards compliance with minimum benchmark required of pre-primary education is anticipated among others.

Keywords: Health status; Safety in schools; Child-friendly environment; Pre-primary school

Introduction and Background

A stimulating, healthy and safe environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them the confidence to explore, discover and learn objectively. Environments that are stimulating for young children should be enriched with safe objects for children to explore, freedom of movement, healthy practices and a variety of experiences.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is considered by stakeholders to be the most critical level of education for social, emotional, language and security, cognitive, and physical development of children. The caregiving experiences during the early years have a significant role in the teaching and learning process because from conception through early childhood, infants and young children need a safe and healthy upbringing in a friendly and stimulating environment.

Early childhood development is characterised by rapid physical growth. In the early years, children are vulnerable as they explore the world around them and learn. It is also a period in which brain-cell connectivity and the development of cognitive abilities and skills are critical. Safe and friendly environments help children to interact, learn and acquire new skills.

Despite the importance of the environment to the overall development of the child, some child-care centres in Nigeria have been found wanting in the provision of an adequate environment. Reports and literature have raised concerns about unsafe and unhealthy environmental practices in early child-care centres, including physical injury, drinking of hazardous substances, poor ventilation, poor illumination, abuse, neglect, bullying and poor hygiene.

According to the National Minimum Standards for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria, an effective centre should have appropriate equipment, adequate classroom space, flexible sitting arrangement, functional pictures, appropriate records, suitable furniture, instructional materials, health facilities, safe water, hygienic environment, age-appropriate toilets, safety measures and an operational licence from relevant authorities.

Specific Objectives

1. determine compliance of the health status of pre-primary schools in Lagos State;
2. determine the safety status of pre-primary schools in Lagos State;
3. assess the child-friendliness of pre-primary schools in Lagos State;
4. ascertain whether there is any significant difference in health status, safety and child-friendliness between private and public pre-primary schools in Lagos State.

Research Questions

1. How adequate is the health status of pre-primary schools in Lagos State?
2. How safe are pre-primary schools in Lagos State?
3. How child-friendly is the environment of pre-primary schools in Lagos State?

4. Is there any significant difference in health status, safety and child-friendliness between private and public pre-primary schools in Lagos State?

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design involving direct observation of prevailing situations. The design enabled the researchers to observe sampled pre-primary schools with pre-determined indicators for assessing the school environment.

The population consisted of all nursery schools in the Lagos-West Senatorial District of Nigeria. Three contiguous local government areas were purposively selected: Ikeja, Agege and Alimosho. The sample comprised sixty (60) pre-primary schools, selected at twenty schools per local government area based on availability of nursery section.

The instrument for data collection was the School Observation Checklist (SOC) developed by the researcher. It had four sections. Section A contained five items on school bio-data, including name and type of school and total number of pupils. Sections B, C and D measured health status, safety measures and child-friendly environment respectively.

Items were rated on a three-point scale of Poor Compliance (PC), Average Compliance (AC) and High Compliance (HC). Experts in Educational Evaluation and Childhood Education reviewed the instrument for content, grammar and format. A composite reliability coefficient of 0.91 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha, while health, safety and child-friendly measures yielded reliability values of 0.76, 0.85 and 0.71 respectively.

Consent of the care-centre authority for each selected school was sought and obtained. The instrument was administered with the support of two research assistants and retrieved on the spot. The exercise was completed within three weeks. Data were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, median, standard deviation and t-test.

Results

Research Question 1: Health Status of Pre-Primary Schools

The grand median for health status was 2.00, indicating average/unsatisfactory compliance with the prescribed minimum benchmark.

S/N	Items	PC	AC	HC	S.D	Median
1	Standard and fully equipped First Aid Box	5 (8.3)	47 (78.3)	8 (13.3)	0.47	2.00
2	Availability of clean water	5 (8.3)	45 (75.0)	10 (16.7)	0.50	2.00
3	Availability of soap for hand washing	5 (8.3)	51 (85.0)	4 (6.7)	0.39	2.00
4	Availability of wash hand basin	5 (8.3)	49 (81.7)	6 (10.0)	0.43	2.00
5	Availability of hand towel	7 (11.7)	48 (80.0)	5 (8.3)	0.45	2.00
6	Linkage with a nearby health facility	14 (23.3)	31 (51.7)	15 (25.0)	0.70	2.00
7	Availability of proper refuse disposal baskets	1 (1.7)	37 (61.7)	22 (36.7)	0.52	3.00
8	Availability of toilet for both caregivers and children	2 (3.3)	53 (88.3)	5 (8.3)	0.34	2.00
9	Regular hand washing	4 (6.7)	54 (90.0)	2 (3.3)	0.32	2.00

Note: PC = Poor Compliance; AC = Average Compliance; HC = High Compliance. Grand median = 2.00.

Research Question 2: Safety Measures

Safety compliance showed a grand median of 2.00. Apart from fencing of centres to reduce risk to children, which showed high compliance in the visible table, most safety indicators were at an average or poor level. The indicators included clean environment, dry/non-waterlogged land, locked and secured water source, absence of dangerous objects, spacious classrooms, illumination, ventilation, secured doors and windows, day/night security, daily inspection of the environment, and close supervision of children.

Research Question 3: Child-Friendly Environment

The child-friendly environment of pre-primary schools in Lagos State was reported at an average level of compliance. The indicators included maintenance of a clean environment, beautiful and stimulating environment with flowers and ornamental plants, keeping the environment free from stigmatization and bullying, use of play-way method, charts,

posters, pictures and other instructional materials, opportunities for children to explore the environment, and age-appropriate decoration and classroom setting.

Research Question 4: Difference Between Private and Public Schools

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.	Decision
Health status	Private	31	19.81	2.06	58	4.564	.000	Significant
Health status	Public	29	17.07	2.58	58			
Safety	Private	31	43.42	4.15	58	5.347	.000	Significant
Safety	Public	29	37.66	4.40	58			
Child-friendliness	Private	31	28.26	2.14	58	4.310	.000	Significant
Child-friendliness	Public	29	25.14	3.3	58			

The t-test results showed significant differences in favour of private pre-primary schools across health status, safety and child-friendliness.

Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed that pre-primary schools in Lagos State fell short of the prescribed minimum benchmark in relation to health status, safety and child-friendliness. The results suggest long years of inadequate government attention, weak enforcement, poor economic capacity of some proprietors, and limited awareness among some parents and caregivers about the health implications of unsuitable school environments.

Private pre-primary schools performed better than public pre-primary schools in health status, safety and child-friendly environment. This may be connected with better funding and stronger proprietorial control in private schools, while public schools may be affected by insufficient facilities and years of neglect.

Conclusion

Based on the results, pre-primary schools in Lagos State did not satisfy the minimum benchmark of standard required to implement preschool curriculum in terms of safety measures, healthy environment and child-friendliness. Private schools had better ratings when compared with public schools.

Recommendations

1. Proprietors of pre-primary schools should demonstrate more commitment and determination toward provision of educational resources, facilities and other physical requirements for pre-primary education.
2. The Ministry of Education and relevant quality assurance agencies should ensure that minimum standards are reinforced and sustained.
3. There is need for collaboration between ministries of health, environment, housing and education for the actualisation of a healthful, safe and child-friendly school environment.
4. Government should clamp down on non-registered schools and day-care centres in order to discourage the tendency to expose children to health hazards and avoidable risks.

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