

Review Article

Early Childhood Relationships: The Foundation for a Sustainable Future

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ABSTRACT

This paper opines that one effective way to construct a just and sustainable future is to pay attention to early childhood relationships; to ensure adequate care and development for all children and to teach them the kinds of knowledge, skills and values – such as empathy, sharing, respect for others, love for nature - that promotes sustainability from a very early age. This educational level of the child provides for the physical, motor, health, nutritional, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional and social development of the pre-school child. If child education can provide these vital necessities which are fundamental for a sustainable future, it is not therefore unlikely to have an important and strong relationship with the pupils' performance at the primary school level and perhaps at the secondary and tertiary levels. In this paper also, early childhood relationship is viewed as humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve foundation for a sustainable future. In conclusion, education for a sustainable future requires establishing a new relationship among people and with the environment that sustains human life - a relationship that enables societies to pursue development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Key Words: Early childhood, Relationships and Sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education for sustainability in the early years is a significantly under-practiced, under-resourced and under-examined field, even though young children are the ones who will bear the consequences of our actions and inactions on sustainability-related issues. After all, they will be living the longest – as economic, social and environmental conditions worsen. Nevertheless, over the past decade, a great change has been occurring, as interest in sustainability education for young children has expanded, and practitioners and researchers begin to think about, develop and implement early childhood relationships with sustainability focus. It is now being recognized that the early years are the most significant growth period in a child's life (Oyewumi *et al.*, 2010; Sooter, 2013). Experiences during

this phase extensively influence physical and neurological developments, which drive biological, psychological and social responses throughout the entire human lifespan.

However, this paper opines that one effective way to construct a just and sustainable future is to pay attention to early childhood; to ensure adequate care and development for all children and to teach them the kinds of knowledge, skills and values – such as empathy, sharing, respect for others, love for nature - that promotes sustainability from a very early age. The first years of a child's life are a crucial development period, and children who are nurtured and stimulated during these years are much more prepared for formal and non-formal education and are more likely to have the social skills they will need when it is time for kindergarten. Parents are a

child's first teachers, but early childhood education programmes are also important, especially with the growing number of families with one parent, and families where both parents work full time (Tassoni *et al.*, 2005).

What is Early Childhood Education?

The foundation of education of the child is the pre-schools education which forms an integral part of his or her early education which may be formal or informal, which is given in an educational institution to children aged 1 to 5+ prior to their entering the primary school (Nakpodia, 2011). This educational level of the child provides for the physical, motor, health, nutritional, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional and social development of the pre-school child. If child education can provide these vital necessities which are fundamental for a sustainable future, it is not therefore unlikely to have an important and strong relationship with the pupils' performance at the primary school level and perhaps at the secondary and tertiary levels (Nakpodia, 2003; Obidike, 2012 and Ibhaze, 2016).

Maduewesi (1999) refers to early childhood education as the education offered to children who have not yet reached the statutory age of beginning primary school. He further maintained that it is a semi-formal education arrangement, usually outside home where by young children from about the age of 3 years are exposed through play like activities in a group setting through mental, social and physical learning suited to their developmental stages, until the mandatory age of government approved formal schooling. FRN (2004) refers to early childhood education (pre-primary education) as an education given in an educational institution to children aged 3-5 plus prior to their enrollment in the primary school.

Why Early Childhood Education?

Underpinning the importance attached to early childhood education which

pre-primary education is an integral part, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in 1990 undertook a joint commitment to make an urgent universal appeal to give every child a better future. In addition, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasized urgent priority to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for all children (Maduewesi, 2001). Ajayi (2007) documented eight reasons given at these fora in support of the provision of affordable, quality programmes of early childhood that are community based, and which are linked with health care and nutrition as part of an integrated approach to meeting the needs of the young child. These reasons include:

- a) From conception to six years of age, children, according to research findings, undergo rapid mental, social and physical development to the extent that by the age of six, their brains would have developed to almost the size of an adult;
- b) The convention on the rights of the child stipulates that children have a right to live and develop to their full capacity;
- c) Moral and social values postulate that through children, societies pass on values and culture from generation to generation;
- d) Supporting the development of the child physically and mentally leads to increased enrolment, improves performance and the society generally;
- e) Provision of early childcare facilities and offer equal opportunities to children from both the privileged and disadvantaged homes;
- f) A programme in early childhood development should be used as an entry point for other developmental activities which will benefit the entire community;
- g) ECC (Early Child Care) projects should be linked with other developmental activities for women, nutrition, health, water and sanitation.

- h) There is a growing demand for early childhood relationships and better ways of caring for children through an ECC project given the advancement in science and technology which now ensures the survival of many more children, thereby increasing population growth.

The National Policy on Education for Nigeria became necessary to avoid the previous half-measured educational policies, administration and control which was a hallmark of the missionary and regional eras of education in the country. The policy is meant to put in clear perspective the educational jurisdiction of the Federal Government, including that of the State and Local Governments (Are, 2008 & Oyewuni *et al.*, 2010).

Early Childhood Relationships for a Sustainable Future

Early childhood relationship is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve foundation for a sustainable future (Webster-Stratton *et al.*, 2001). The relationships can be discussed in the following ways:

1. Teacher - child relationships in early childhood

Children who develop warm, positive relationships with their kindergarten teachers are more excited about learning, more positive about coming to school, more self-confident, and achieve more in the classroom. In early childhood settings, each moment that teachers and children interact with one another is an opportunity to develop positive relationships. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to build positive relationships with children. Teacher behaviors such as listening to children, making eye contact with them, and engaging in many one-to-one, face-to-face interactions with young children promote secure teacher-child relationships (Elicker & Fortner-Wood, 1995). It is important for teachers to use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration children's differing needs,

interests, styles, and abilities. For example, with infants and toddlers, teachers respond to their cries or other signs of distress. Teachers let children know they care about them through warm, responsive, physical contact such as giving pats on the back, hugging, and holding young children in their laps. For preschool children, teachers encourage mutual respect between children and adults by waiting until children finish asking questions before answering them, and by encouraging children to listen when others speak.

Research according to Kontos *et al.*, (1995) has suggested that teacher-child relationships play a significant role in influencing young children's social and emotional development. In studies of teacher-child relationships, children who had a secure relationship with their preschool and kindergarten teachers demonstrated good peer interactions and positive relationships with teachers and peers in elementary school. On the other hand, children who had insecure relationships with teachers had more difficulty interacting with peers and engaged in more conflict with their teachers. In addition, research has shown that teachers' interaction styles with children help children build positive and emotionally secure relationships for a *sustainable future* (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997).

2. Environment- child relationships in early childhood

Growth-promoting relationships are based on the child's continuous give-and-take ("serve and return" interaction) with a human partner who provides what nothing else in the world can offer – experiences that are individualized to the child's unique personality style; that build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative; that shape the child's self-awareness; and that stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind (Dunn, 1993).

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development - intellectual,

social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral. The quality and stability of a child's human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself (Reis *et al.*, 2000).

Simply put, relationships are the “active ingredients” of the environment's influence on healthy human development. They incorporate the qualities that best promote competence and well-being – individualized responsiveness, mutual action-and-interaction, and an emotional connection to another human being, be it a parent, peer, grandparent, aunt, uncle, neighbor, teacher, coach, or any other person who has an important impact on the child's early development. Relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people and this is a direction towards a sustainable future.

3. Parents- child relationships in early childhood

Nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults are essential to healthy human development beginning from birth. Early, secure attachments contribute to the growth of a broad range of competencies, including a love of learning, a comfortable sense of oneself, positive social skills, and multiple successful relationships at later ages, and a sophisticated understanding of emotions, commitment, morality, and other aspects of human relationships. Simply put, establishing successful relationships with adults and other children provides a foundation for a sustainable future and capacities that children will use for a lifetime (Kochanska, 2002).

Research according to Thompson (2000) also suggests that positive family involvement contributes to a child's academic success. You are your child's first teacher, and your child is developing social skills through interactions with you and other family members and friends. Parent-child interactions are the foundation of a child's social development, and when you are able to provide your child with reasons for your rules and values, they will be more likely to be socially active and open-minded.

The “serve and return” interaction between parent and baby – in which young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, and gestures and adults respond with the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them – builds and strengthens brain architecture and creates a relationship in which the baby's experiences are affirmed and new abilities are nurtured. Children who have healthy relationships with their parents are more likely to develop insights into other people's feelings, needs, and thoughts, which form a foundation for cooperative interactions with others and an emerging conscience (Early Child Care Research Network, 2000).

Sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships also are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children and enhanced social competence and work skills later in school, which illustrates the connection between social/emotional development and intellectual growth (Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). The broader quality of the home environment (including toys, activities, and interactions within the family setting) also is strongly related to early cognitive and language development, performance on IQ testing, and later achievement in school.

4. Peers relationships in early childhood

Relationships with peers are also important in achieving a *sustainable future*. When children play or interact with their peers, they are learning more about social

behaviour, including how to express themselves, how to take turns and how to apply empathy when dealing with others. When children are able to control their emotions, they can make better decisions and exercise more judgment than a child with poor regulation. Peer relationships are thought to play an important role in children's development (Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). They provide opportunities for getting acquainted with the social norms and contexts in which capacities for self-control may be tested and refined. Children who experience greater peer acceptance and friendship tend to feel more positively about the school experience and perform better in the classroom.

Children have different ways of interacting with their peers. Some are gregarious, others are too shy to get involved (although they want to), some need time to “warm up,” and others are not as interested in being sociable. All of these variations fall within a normal range, and it is essential to differentiate among the many potential reasons (both biological and environmental) that a young child may have limited or difficult interactions with others. Playing cooperatively, making friends, and sustaining friendships over time are not always easy. Any child with severely limited peer involvement is at considerable risk for significant adverse developmental consequences (Didonet, 2008).

Young children also learn a great deal from each other. They learn how to share, to engage in reciprocal interactions (e.g., taking turns, giving and receiving), to take the needs and desires of others into account, and to manage their own impulses. Just being around other children, however, is not enough. The development of friendships is essential, as children learn and play more competently in the rapport created with friends rather than when they are dealing with the social challenges of interacting with casual acquaintances or unfamiliar peers (Kaga, 2008 & Norddahl, 2008).

5. Child-classroom relationships in early childhood

When building relationships is at the center of an early childhood classroom, the quality of child- teacher interactions and academics improves. Teacher and parents notice children using kind words with each other. They see children working together as a team towards achieving a sustainable future. There is a decrease in aggressive behaviour and negative attitudes. There is an overall improvement in the classroom climate (Qemuge & Mongolia, 2008). Academics and school readiness also increase. Teachers lead group discussions, model, and practice building relationship skills such as how to kindly get a friend's attention, how to take turns, and how to solve friendship squabbles. These opportunities to learn and practice within each day help children connect with others, disengage stress, and commit to making positive, kind choice towards achieving a sustainable future.

Early Childhood Relationships: Way Forward for a Sustainable Future

Education for sustainability must begin in the foundation of early childhood. Learning begins at birth (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, 2003), and even before. Early childhood education lays the foundation for a *sustainable future*. Basic life skills, such as communication (including pre-literacy) skills, co-operation, autonomy, creativity, problem-solving and persistence are acquired, and positive and negative dispositions towards learning (e.g. motivation to learn, pleasure in learning) and society are shaped in early years (Kamara, 2008). While the skills and dispositions learned in early childhood evolve throughout life, they can be carried on and reinforced through continued interactions within families and communities.

1) Early childhood relationships for sustainability can take place in different settings: in families, communities, schools, early childhood programmes,

leisure centres, to mention a few. Formal, non-formal and informal settings should all be used.

- 2) Awareness must be created that everyone is responsible for, and needed to save the planet and make societies sustainable. Resources – cultural (e.g. local folk tales and songs, traditional ceremonies), economic (e.g. businesses), social and political (e.g. NGOs, governments) – must be mobilized for making learning moments relevant to sustainability and meaningful for young children.
- 3) Where structured early childhood relationship programmes are available, the aims, content and methods of such programmes can be re-oriented towards sustainable future.
- 4) Early childhood education for sustainability should give children the knowledge, values, desire and skills to make decisions encouraging for a sustainable future. To attain this, children should have opportunities to learn about and experience diversity of people and cultures, as well as nature, and thereby learn to respect nature and community.
- 5) Children should not be expected to solve the environmental problems for which adults are responsible, but rather be given experience and tools to use in decision-making and action taking for a sustainable future.
- 6) They should be developed in such a way that the future, the real future that we all dream about, will come about. The sustainability of any society lies in young children. There can be no sustainability without a quality early childhood education.

In conclusion, education for a sustainable future requires establishing a new relationship among people and with the environment that sustains human life - a relationship that enables societies to pursue development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. I

hope that this paper will inspire further reflection and action to educate and empower early childhood relationships for a common, sustainable future.

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