

ENHANCING PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS' PERFORMANCE THROUGH LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND PARTICIPATION

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Abstract - The role of the classroom environment in influencing pre-primary school pupils' performance cannot be overstated. An environment that promotes active participation and fosters engagement is crucial for the holistic development of young learners. This paper argues that the physical, social, and psychosocial aspects of the learning environment must be carefully designed and maintained to maximize the academic and developmental potential of pre-primary pupils. By focusing on the importance of adequate learning resources, appropriate classroom organization, and encouraging participation, this paper presents the opinion that an enriching environment significantly enhances learning outcomes. Additionally, it highlights the necessity for educators to consider the specific characteristics of pre-primary learners when selecting and utilizing resources. Empirical studies support the idea that well-structured environments not only facilitate engagement but also encourage independent learning, thus contributing to the long-term success of pupils.

Keywords: Classroom environment, pupils' participation, pre-primary education, learning resources, academic performance

Introduction

The classroom environment is more than just a physical space; it serves as a dynamic platform that shapes the development and academic success of young learners. At the pre-primary level, the learning environment plays a crucial role in fostering the cognitive, emotional and social growth of children. The relationship between a well-organized learning space and students' participation cannot be overstated. An environment that is thoughtfully designed, with attention to the arrangement of resources, learning corners, and suitable furniture, facilitates children's active engagement in their learning process. These features not only support proximal learning but also stimulate curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking skills vital for long-term academic success. Educational theorists, such as Maria Montessori, Fredrick Froebel and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have long recognized the significance of a well-structured environment in helping children unlock their potentials. The theorists advocated for an environment that provides the necessary physical, social, and emotional resources to nurture the natural development of a child's abilities. According to Schwartz (2021), the

environment is not merely a backdrop but a powerful factor that can either promote or hinder a child's success. In this regard, the classroom must be considered as an ecosystem, where various elements work together to create a conducive learning atmosphere.

A classroom environment that emphasizes learner-centered principles actively supports the construction of knowledge by the students themselves. As noted by Viavonu and Prof. Ogunfowora (2023), environments that encourage active participation provide opportunities for children to take ownership of their learning, engage in problem-solving, and collaborate with peers. The characteristics of a learner-centered environment include a focus on students' engagement, personalized learning experiences, and the flexibility to cater for individual learning styles and needs. Similarly, Vatiainen (2014) describes participatory learning as a model that involves children in culturally and personally relevant activities, allowing them to engage meaningfully in their own educational processes. This approach fosters autonomy, critical thinking, and a sense of belonging each of which are essential for children's academic growth. Furthermore, the physical environment such as the layout of the classroom, the availability of teaching materials, and the adequacy of space has a direct impact on a child's ability to learn effectively. The arrangement of teaching tools and learning resources, alongside the curriculum and teaching methods, contribute to the overall learning experience (Viavonu et al., 2023). For instance, a well-ventilated and brightly colored classroom can enhance mood, increase focus, and stimulate interest in learning. Teaching materials, from books to educational toys, help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and hands-on application, ensuring that learning is both engaging and practical.

An essential aspect of the classroom environment is its psychosocial dimension. A nurturing atmosphere that promotes positive interactions between peers, teachers, and caregivers creates a supportive space for emotional development and social skills acquisition. The quality of teacher-student relationships, as well as the ability to foster cooperation among classmates, enhances the learning experience and contributes to a sense of community within the classroom. Teachers who are attuned to the social needs of their students help to create an environment where children feel safe, valued, and encouraged to participate. In light of the above, it is clear that the design and management of the classroom environment go beyond simple logistical considerations. Hence, the

thoughtful integration of physical, social, and psychological elements within the classroom helps shape not only academic outcomes but also personal development, including socialization, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem. As Knauf (2020) states, early childhood education centers face the challenge of creating spaces that are conducive for participation, engagement, and learning. For optimal outcomes, it is imperative that educational stakeholders including teachers, parents, and policymakers—collaborate to ensure that pre-primary classrooms are equipped with the resources, support systems, and learning structures necessary to foster the holistic development of young learners.

Empirical Studies Supporting the Importance of Learning Environment on Children's Performance

In a research study by Duruji, Azuh, and Oviasogie (2014), the impact of the learning environment on students' performance in external examinations in secondary schools in Ota, Nigeria, was examined, considering factors such as school facilities, class size, school location, school planning, aesthetics, maintenance culture, sanitation, and conveniences. The study established that the state of the learning environment and quality of infrastructure, along with the extent to which they are being maintained, has a strong bearing on academic performance among students. In a study conducted by Odiagbe (2015) in Uhumwode Local Government Area of Edo State, it was found that in most schools, pupils were sitting on the floor, as there were no chairs and tables for the children. Some schools had two or three long tables and chairs, while others had none at all. Teachers were sitting on long benches provided by the teachers themselves. In this regard, the Federal Government's guidelines were not met. It was also reported that the school/classroom environment is far from being friendly. In all the sampled schools, play facilities were not provided. The use of play facilities is a very important aspect of children's development. Any attempt to deprive children of these essential facilities will have a negative effect on their growth. This period is critical for acquiring basic skills and physical development that will help the child throughout his or her lifetime. It was also found that the classroom walls were not painted to make them attractive to the children. An attractive setting is important; this means that a variety of colors and textures should be carefully used in a school environment. Many factors are involved, including site, building, and basic equipment. In the early stages of life, the child's immediate environment presents a high level of challenges. Findings in

this research have shown that the quality of public pre-primary schools' environments in Uhumwode falls short of FGN standards. Farotimi (2015) avers that the adequacy and availability of electricity, good learning corners, portable chairs and tables, proper fencing of the school, availability of game materials, the condition of the school building, availability of outdoor environments, adequacy of classroom space/ventilation, and teacher-student rapport enable pupils to effectively utilize school facilities. The classroom arrangement had an influence on pupils' academic performance, while the method of teaching had no significant influence. Hence, it contributed to better performance. The adequacy of instructional materials has a significant influence on the academic performance of the pupils.

Adamu (2015) examined impact of the learning environment on the performance of students in public secondary schools in Taraba State, Nigeria. The findings revealed a significant difference in the performance of the two groups (experimental and control), implying that classrooms equipped with adequate furniture and smaller class sizes, alongside the use of instructional materials, positively impact students' performance in junior secondary schools. Usman and Madudili (2019) conducted a study entitled "Evaluation of the Effect of Learning Environments in Nigeria" using a secondary research approach. The paper examined the concept of the learning environment and its significant impact on students' academic performance in Nigeria. Based on the findings, recommendations on the modalities to make the learning environment productive and competitive, such as adequate funding of the education sector, proper supervision of school activities, and regular training/re-training of staff, are suggested. Astrom et al. (2020) investigated "Everyday Environments and Activities of Children and Teachers in Swedish Preschools." The study focused on how preschool teachers and children spend their time, which sets the stage for child engagement and learning. To describe the characteristics of environments and activities, and to compare child engagement in indoor and outdoor free play, systematic observations of children and teachers were performed in 78 Swedish preschool units. Results showed that indoor and outdoor free play were the main activity settings. Children interacted as much with other children as with teachers. The content focus was dominated by non-pretend play, construction, art, and music, followed by pretend play and academic content. Child engagement was significantly higher in free play indoors compared to outdoors. Teachers engaged

in various tasks, but their central role was managing. Teachers were typically in proximity to small groups of children or by themselves, mostly talking to or listening to a single child. Findings are discussed concerning the preschool curriculum and future research needs. Gilvard (2016) conducted a study aimed at investigating the impact of environmental factors (such as schools' open space, noise, lighting, and painting) on learning and academic achievement of elementary students. The findings indicated that appropriate environmental factors, including the coloring and lighting of educational environments and schools' openness, have an impact on learning and academic achievement of elementary school students.

Concept of Pre-Primary Education

Early Childhood Education is also known as Pre-primary education or Pre-School Education. These terms will be used interchangeably. The concept of pre-primary education, like most other concepts in education, cannot be pinned down to a single definition. Early childhood care and education means good practice policies and programs that focus on providing quality care and education to ensure girls and boys receive positive, holistic opportunities for development (Education Learning and Development Module Foundation Level, 2021). Early childhood education refers to the formal and informal education and care provided to young children typically between birth and eight years old. This period is critical as it sets the foundation for all future learning and development (Gray Group International, 2023). Abidogun et al. (2020) quoted Maduewesi (1999), who opined that early childhood education is a semi-formal education arrangement whereby young children from about age three are exposed through play-like activities in a group setting to mental, social, and physical learning suited to their developmental stage until the mandatory age of government-approved formal school. Elvis (2018) defined early childhood education as the education given to children from birth through age six and focuses on the school experiences of children in that age range. According to Elvis, the early childhood years are more important than any other six-year period in the life of a human being in terms of the learning that occurs, the attitudes about learning and school that develop, and the social skills that are acquired, which will enable the individual to succeed in today's world. Section 2:11 of the National Policy on Education (2014) defines Pre-primary Education as "Education given in an

educational institution to children aged three to five, plus prior to their entering primary school.”

Pre-primary education is the “education that involves the teaching and learning of specific intellectual skills to enable the child acquire the skills for compulsory schooling (Osanyin, 2018).” From the above definitions of scholars, one can conclude that early childhood education is specially designed academic programs for young children before the age of formal schooling. This education is seen in an upward-moving process, that is, from infancy into toddlerhood, and from toddlerhood into ages three, four, and five—moving from immature behavior to more mature behavior. Section 2:11 of the National Policy on Education (NPE 2014) indicates three major divisions of Early Childhood Education. Early childhood education is an organized form to a major extent. The teachers and other members of the pre-school who are involved in this education are required to be systematic and methodical in their workings and conduct. It requires efficiency in its form and implication; within this framework, the term care holds much significance (Kapur, 2018).

Concept of Classroom Environment

The classroom environment is an aspect of the school environment; it is an indoor space where furniture, fixtures, materials, books, games, and toys are arranged in a manner that gives full visibility of all parts of the room for pupils, caregivers, facilitators and directors. The way in which the classroom is arranged can accommodate different learning styles and cultures, reflecting the curriculum of the learners. The pre-school environment must be stimulating and fascinating, where indoor activities take place. It must be accessible and convenient for children and have tables for facilitators, areas for separate learning such as arts, blocks, books, science corners, sand tables, water tables, interactive areas, manipulative object areas, large motor activity areas, and writing areas, among others. These promote activities such as fine motor play, like molding sand, tracing, fixing, and building castles with or without the instruction of caregivers. The classroom environment provides windows of opportunity for learners from diverse backgrounds to develop the right and acceptable attitudes, skills, and competencies essential for their future well-being and quality achievement in life. Schwartz (2021) opines that the term physical environment refers to the overall design and layout of a given classroom and its learning centers. Teachers ought to

design the environment by organizing its spaces, furnishings, and materials to maximize the learning opportunities and the engagement of every child.

The physical environment is central to the learning experiences and to the way children feel about their schools; it addresses the need for independence, movement, interaction, and the growth of motor abilities. Preschool education should not only concentrate on lesson planning but also on spatial arrangements, which are equally important (Shaari & Ahmad, 2016). Children are influenced by their physical environment as much as their social settings, as it also affect children's behavior, academic performance, and development (Shaari & Ahmad, 2016). Teachers will feel valued and motivated when they have access to good infrastructure, significantly improving their working performance (Shaari & Ahmad, 2016).

Concept of Social Learning Environment

The term social environment, as described by Green-Taylor and Schwartz (2021), refers to the way that a classroom environment influences or supports the interactions that occur among young children, teachers, and family members. A well-designed social environment helps foster positive peer relationships, creates positive interactions between adults and children, and provides opportunities for adults to support children in achieving their social goals. To create a classroom environment that supports positive social interactions, teachers need to plan activities that take the following aspects into consideration:

Group Size and Composition

Children ought to spend time every day in different kinds of groups. Groups of various sizes open up different opportunities for social interaction and learning. Activities suited to large groups include opening group circle time, story time, mealtimes, and outside time. Small groups allow more time for interaction with individual children and are ideal for teaching new skills and providing feedback. Additionally, small groups offer more opportunities for children to practice their language skills and for teachers to facilitate children's communication development (Green-Taylor, 2021). Moreover, well-trained teachers who use the right methods to conduct the preschool program or curriculum, creating a stimulating and attractive environment, establishing social and educational inclusion in class, and maintaining regular communication with parents are also crucial. The National Policy on Education states that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers. Therefore, the

competence required of early childhood teachers includes pedagogical skills to handle children at this level in order to enhance the all-around development of the children.

Psychosocial Learning Environment

The psychosocial environment entails active and successful participation by learners in the learning environment, a sense of acceptance and worthiness, avoidance of threatening tasks and situations, and a persuasive sense of warmth, openness, and trust. Children progress most rapidly in the most desirable directions when they see themselves as successful in participating actively in learning and play activities. They feel good about their accomplishments and have a strong sense of acceptance and worthiness. If the teacher of young children is warm and caring, chances are that these traits will be modeled by the children, enhancing their participation and high achievement rate.

Effective Classroom Space

Social constructivist theories of learning highlight the essentiality of social interaction in promoting learning and thinking (Nihaadh, 2023). The classroom seating arrangement often depends on where the ceiling fans are located and the glare on the classroom board, rather than on the teacher's consideration of where the child needs to be seated. Classroom lighting, ventilation, fixtures, accessibility to learning resources, and sanitary facilities need to follow a concept that considers the children's and the teacher's needs for a conducive learning environment to improve achievement. Classroom size matters due to the teacher's availability of access to students and in terms of classroom management. Anyone who spends time in a classroom will quickly discover how one classroom can feel different from another in terms of atmosphere, tone and ideology (Osanyin, 2018). She added that the classroom climate may be defined in terms of at least three aspects of its environment: (i) a physical environment that is welcoming and conducive to learning, (ii) a social environment that promotes communication and interaction, and (iii) an academic environment that promotes learning and self-fulfillment.

Pupils' Participation

Participation entails interaction between children and educators in a learning environment (Kangas, 2016). Ahyol and Erdem (2021) quoting Kilic and Durmus (2016) explain participation as an approach, experience, and learning

process. It is stated that the qualifications of participation, which are the features of the learning process, are transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, safe, risk-sensitive, accountable, and supported by education. Kilic and Ozturk (2018) analyze the implementation level of children's right to participate in an elementary school in terms of legal and other regulations. It was concluded that the children were not involved in decision-making while ensuring their participation in the students' council, which is one of the legal regulations. It is very important to uphold the right to participate in school since children spend most of their time in school after their home environment and they are part of the social conditions. For children's participation in the pedagogical context of early childhood education, Kangas (2016) presents guiding principles. Her approach is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) as well as on the participatory learning approach.

- The right to participate includes the idea of making meaningful choices and suggests that educators should take the voice of children into account when planning everyday learning environments, activities, interactions and routines.
- The right should be considered a “living thing” so that children can express their right to participation in action and also develop their skills concerning participatory rights.
- Participatory rights exist in everyday context, which means that chances to express and experience participation should be available for children here and now, thus giving them meaningful learning experiences.
- Participatory learning can be promoted only in environments where dialogical interaction is encouraged. Shared experiences based on listening, interest, and respect support children in building knowledge and becoming active agents in their learning processes.
- Participatory learning is an active process where educators scaffold and enhance children's understanding through their experiences and ideas to promote self-regulated learning. This requires that both verbal and non-verbal expressions of children are taken into account.
- Participation encourages growth, well-being, and imagination: Opportunities to solve problems and explore the environment support

children's skills in reasoning, developing logic, and reflection. These are essential for creativity in generating new thoughts, ideas, and knowledge. Children's participation from the foregoing is often understood as the act of listening to the voices of children; thus, communication and interaction with adults and peers are considered important in early childhood education. Children's points of view, experiences, perspectives, and ability to act and express ideas and views from a young age are found important; thus, they influence their lives and shape their learning. In other words, participation also means taking part in activities with the understanding that one's actions are acknowledged and may be acted upon. This requires respect and recognition of children's voices and empowers their ideas to support them in having an impact on their own lives.

Pre-Primary School Pupils' Performance

This paper is borne out of the desire to know how performance is enhanced by classroom environments and pupils' participation; hence, performance is described as the extent to which pupils are performing in class and achieving educational goals. In early childhood education, pupils are evaluated based on their performance in various areas such as literacy, numeracy, and writing, etc. Obeta (2014) as cited in Okonkwo (2022) sees academic performance as the outcome of education; it is the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution has achieved educational goals. Academic performance is commonly measured by continuous assessment and examinations (internal and external examinations). However, the major examinations at this level are the First School Leaving Certificate and the Common Entrance Examination.

Learning Characteristics of a Pre-Child

Most children aged one to five years are naturally active, curious, and ready to learn by imitation and doing. They can learn various motor skills with little help from adults. During this period, the brain of a child attains nearly 100% of its total growth. This is the period that Swiss psychologist Piaget (1969) calls the "Pre-Operational Stage." This period is very crucial to the cognitive development or mental functions in children, i.e., language, motor skills, psychosocial, and cognitive; these are greatly influenced by the educational environment. The quality of the abstract and physical environment significantly affects learning and performance, and it is very important for early childhood education to provide an environment that promotes a child's curiosity, creativity,

and encourages a team spirit that enhances their performance. Pre-school children learn by “doing”; hence, the adult must create the environment that enhances creativity. They are busy developing new skills. They like drawing, painting, and building. They also spend a great deal of time pretending. Dress-up clothes, pretend props, and puppets are big favorites. Pre-schoolers are energetic and active. Children are active learners, and their materials should provide them with ways to explore, manipulate, and become involved. Hence, materials should be appropriate for a wide range of skills since children within the same age group develop at individual rates. The material can be used in their most basic form or developed in a variety of ways (open-ended). Children learn through all their senses, so the materials should be appealing to many of the senses.

The Role of Learning Resources in Pre-Primary Education

Learning resources are materials that can expedite learning through the sense of hearing or seeing or both. They are anything that can be profitably employed to facilitate communication and learning. The efficacy of the use of learning resources in curing some of the present-day educational ailments is proven in the ancient Chinese proverb which says:

What I hear, I forget

What I see, I remember

What I do, I understand

In using learning resources to improve communication in the teaching/learning situation, however, various writers have emphasized the importance of the teacher having a thorough knowledge of the values inherent in their usage in schools and how to use them effectively to achieve the desired goal. Wales (1967) says, “No scheme, however admirably planned, or any learning resources, however useful and productive, is going to have any impact unless the teacher in the classroom genuinely understands it, sees this point of it, welcomes it, and is prepared whole-heartedly to take the trouble to make it work.” In addition, the importance of adequately trained personnel to keep some of the resources, especially the media equipment, running has been emphasized. It makes no sense to buy the newest media equipment without preparing adequately to use and service it.

Suitable Learning Resources for Pre-Primary Pupils

The following is a wide variety of learning resources that can be employed in the Pre-Primary school classroom environment. These resources are required to be effectively handled by experts, specifically Pre-Primary school teachers, in order to acquire profitable results in pupils' performance.

Printed Materials: Graphic and photographic illustrations are sometimes useful in explaining or clarifying concepts, ideas, or situations, as well as in promoting the general interest of the learners in the action and aiding greater comprehension of facts. However, they should be clear, relevant, and straight to the point. These must suit the level of experience of the learners as well as their experiential background. The Pre-Primary classroom environment must be decorated with wall charts that convey messages to the learners through diagrams, sketches, and captions, etc. The lettering of these charts must be bold, legible, and neat to have aesthetic value and must be free of spelling errors because once a learner learns wrong materials, it becomes difficult to correct.

Real Objects and Models: Real objects, artifacts, and models, where the real objects are not available, make it easy for the teacher to teach and the learner to understand ideas, actions, or relationships. Learners can compare and contrast and hence make generalizations.

Projected Materials: Photographic slides, film strips, as well as silent and sound films serve to illustrate ideas and generate interest and enthusiasm if suitable in content, well-prepared, and appropriately used. Other projected materials include transparencies used on overhead projectors. The teacher can help learners to use concepts to identify economic and social aspects of reality. Slides can be updated and re-sorted for different teaching/learning purposes. They can be used with the whole class, with small groups, or individuals can use them by using hand-held viewers.

Mass Media Materials: These include television, ICT, radio, among others. Television attracts and sustains attention; it stimulates learners' interest through its motion and sound power, arousing learners' interest and having great impact. Hence, it is a superior version of the classroom chalkboard to develop concepts, compare and contrast relationships. ICT in education usually refers to implementing ICT tools, techniques, and equipment to support teaching and learning and enhance learners' cognitive activities. It is pertinent to note that the primary tool of ICT is the internet. ICT can deliver content and activities that originate and support strong and productive emotions for children. It helps to transform the learning environment into one that is learner-centered, when used appropriately, learning becomes active, collaborative, creative, innovative, and interactive.

Conclusion

The pre-primary school classroom environment plays a pivotal role in shaping the learning experiences and overall development of young learners. Given its profound impact on students' participation and academic performance, it is essential that governments, educational authorities, and other stakeholders prioritize the creation of conducive learning spaces. This involves ensuring that classrooms are equipped with adequate learning resources that promote independent learning and accommodate each child's individual learning pace. Furthermore, teachers must take an active role in planning and organizing these environments to foster opportunities for student engagement. Hence, by facilitating verbal expression, encouraging the use of positional words, and bridging the gap between written and spoken language, teachers can significantly enhance students' learning outcomes. Ultimately, a well-organized and resource-rich classroom, coupled with effective teaching strategies, will serve as a catalyst for improved academic performance and holistic child development, preparing students for future success.

The Way Forward

To enhance the performance of pre-primary school pupils through an optimized learning environment and active participation, several steps should be taken by various stakeholders in education. First, it is imperative that governments allocate sufficient funding for the improvement of pre-primary school infrastructure. Classrooms should be designed with children's developmental needs in mind, ensuring that they are equipped with necessary learning resources, including

learning corners, educational toys, comfortable furniture, and sufficient space for active play and interaction. Teacher training programs must be strengthened to ensure that educators are equipped with the skills to create dynamic and inclusive learning environments. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt learner-centered approaches that promote active participation, foster critical thinking, and nurture curiosity. Regular professional development and workshops on classroom management, resource utilization, and child-centered pedagogies will help teachers effectively engage students in learning activities.

Furthermore, schools should invest in the development of both physical and psychosocial aspects of the learning environment. A child-friendly atmosphere that encourages positive peer interactions, collaboration, and emotional development is crucial for a well-rounded educational experience. Teachers should be trained to observe and respond to the diverse learning needs of students, incorporating both play-based and structured learning activities that cater to different learning styles. Lastly, it is important to involve parents and communities in the educational process. Engaging parents in their children's education and creating strong home-school connections can further enrich the learning experience and ensure that children receive consistent support from both educators and their families. Hence, a comprehensive approach involving adequate resources, teacher training, and community engagement is essential to fostering an environment that enhances pre-primary school pupils' academic performance and overall development. These steps will not only contribute to the immediate academic success of children but also lay the foundation for lifelong learning and personal growth.

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