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CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Early years in life are the most important to the formation of intelligence, personality, and social and cultural behaviour of a child. The year before a child reaches Kindergarten are among the most critical in his or her life to influence learning. That is why modern societies show serious concern for the education of their young ones by providing needed support to prepare them to succeed later in school (Ejeh, 2006). Obidike (2012) states that it is common practice in most societies to make provision for early childhood education programs of various sorts for children below the official school-going age (usually 6 years) mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools. The Federal Government of Nigeria recognizes the importance of early childhood education in Nigeria and as a result it was given prominence in the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2004) as one of the programs in the Nigerian educational system.

What is Early Childhood Education?

Early childhood education is a branch of education theory that relates to the teaching of children (formally and informally) from birth up to the age of eight. According to Maduewesi (1999), early childhood education refers to the Education offered to children who have not reached the statutory age of beginning primary school. Maduewesi averred that it is a semi-formal education arrangement, usually outside the home, where 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 primary school. The objectives of early childhood education, according to FRN (2004), are to effect a smooth transition from home to school; prepare the child for the primary level of education, provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the market or offices); inculcate social norms; inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys and so on; develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit; learn good habits, especially good health habits and teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms and so on through play.

What is Early Childhood Development?

Early childhood development is a certain period in the life of a child when he develops physical, psychological and social features. Nadeao and Hasan (2016) define early childhood development as a holistic concept that refers to the physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and linguistic development of young children until the time they transition to

primary school. Similarly, the group Action Against Hunger (2018) said that early childhood development is a period of rapid and critical development from conception to eight (8) years. They averred that it is a period of quality nurturing care when a child receives adequate nutrition, good health, protection, responsive caregiving, and early learning, which is very vital for their physical, cognitive, linguistic and social-emotional development. It is a period in the life of a child when he is nourished with good nutrients which contributes to the laying of the body structures and building of their entire body systems. Early childhood development is very essential because it helps children in early growth and development and when early development is not managed due to poor nutrition and environment, the effect tells on the child. Stunted growth, exposure to chronic diseases and early death might occur. Early childhood development is therefore essential for any child for maximum growth and good health as they develop and mature into adult members of society.

What is Culture?

Culture is a broad concept that refers to the customs, values, beliefs, and practices of a group of people. It incorporates family roles, rituals, communication styles, emotional expression, social interactions, and learned behavior. Culture also refers to a shared way of life that includes social norms, rules, beliefs, and values that are transmitted across generations (Hill, McBride-Murry, & Anderson 2005, 23). Although cultural groups often share ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, these are not what define culture. Culture has been described as arising from “a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioural standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our lives” (Gay, 2002). Culture infuses and is reflected in routines of daily living. Culture is a primary source of beliefs, attitudes, language, and personal efficacy (belief that one has control over and is responsible for one’s life), sense of time and perceptions of personal space. Culture is the source of the symbols used to capture aspects of life such as important life transitions, relationships, status and power, achievement, group identity, and the meaning of life and death. Culture conveys a set of beliefs about how social relationships should be ordered and how the world operates.

The Importance of Culture in Childhood Development

Through culture, children learn which behaviours and temperaments are preferred or discouraged. For example, independence and self-esteem are valued in some cultures; interdependence and strong connections are preferred in other cultures. Culture shapes the expectations and hopes parents have for their children and how they understand messages about being parents. Actively well for these behaviours through their socialization for interdependence. Early childhood is a key period of mental and emotional growth, and what children perceive and experience can shape their future (Tombowua S.2013). Our childhood environments and how we respond to them can predict the course of our health and well-being as adults. Children learn, therefore, by observing and making associations about their surroundings. Exposure to positive influences can favourably impact a child’s development, while exposure to toxic or stressful influences can negatively impact development.

All things being equal, a child’s cultural influences at birth are neutral. All though, however, some elements of cultural background may not be accepted or understood by the society in which a child grows up, potentially harming a child’s self-image and development. In other words, the social cues a young child takes in from others about

cultural background can help or hamper development because developing children readily internalize what they see and hear. When a young child's cultural background differs from the prevailing culture, for example, the child's family might speak a different language at home, eat different foods, or observe different holidays, it can affect self-image. This is especially the case if peers or even teachers treat the child in a way that reveals bias or casts the child in the role of an outsider.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), childhood exposure to dominant social biases — such as favoring people who are white, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin, wealthy, fluent in English, natives rather than immigrants - can trigger developing children to judge themselves unfavorably by the same limiting standards. When children do that, their development suffers.

Cultural Influences on Child Development

The cultural influence on child development can be seen in various aspects which are discussed below.

Education

Culture plays a significant role in shaping educational practices and the goals of education for children. Different cultures have distinct beliefs about the purpose of education, the role of teachers, and the expectations for children's academic achievement. For example, some cultures may prioritize academic excellence and competition, while others may value holistic development, creativity, and cooperation. Cultural influences on education can shape a child's motivation, learning style, and educational outcomes, as well as their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Cultural Beliefs and Values

Culture plays a significant role in shaping a child's beliefs and values. The beliefs and values of a particular culture are transmitted to children through various channels such as family, community, religion, and education. For example, in some cultures, obedience to authority and respect for elders may be highly valued, while in others, independence and individualism may be emphasized. These cultural beliefs and values shape a child's understanding of what is considered appropriate or acceptable behaviour, which in turn influences their development.

Traditions

Traditions are an essential part of culture and influence child development in various ways. Cultural traditions encompass customs, rituals, celebrations, and practices that are passed down from generation to generation. Traditions provide a sense of belonging, identity, and continuity to children, helping them connect with their cultural heritage. Traditions also shape a child's values, beliefs, and worldview, influencing their understanding of the world and their place in it. For example, cultural traditions related to religious practices, holidays, family gatherings, and community events can shape a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as their cultural identity and sense of belonging. Therefore, culture influences Child Development largely through traditions.

Play

Play is an essential aspect of child development, and culture influences how children engage in play. Play can vary greatly across cultures in terms of the types of play, the toys and games used, and the social norms around play. For example, some cultures may prioritize structured play and educational toys, while others may value imaginative play and communal games. Play also reflects cultural values, beliefs, and traditions, and can be a way for children to learn about their culture, develop social skills, and express their cultural identity.

Gender Roles

Culture also shapes children's understanding of gender roles, which are cultural expectations about how males and females should behave, dress, and interact. Gender roles are learned through socialization and can vary widely across different cultures. Some cultures may have strict gender roles, where males and females are expected to conform to traditional gender norms, while others may have more flexible and fluid gender roles. Children learn about gender roles and expectations through cultural norms, media, and socialization processes, which can shape their self-identity, attitudes, and behavior related to gender.

Parenting Practices

Parenting practices are deeply influenced by culture and play a crucial role in child development. Different cultures have distinct parenting styles, which are shaped by cultural norms, beliefs, and values. Parenting styles may vary in terms of discipline, communication, nurturance, and expectations for children's behaviour. For example, some cultures may prioritize strict discipline and obedience, while others may value warmth and responsiveness. These parenting practices influence a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development, as well as their self-concept and attachment patterns.

Socialization

Culture plays a significant role in the socialization process, which refers to how children learn the norms, values, and behaviours of their culture. Socialization occurs through various agents, including family, peers, schools, and communities, and it shapes a child's social skills, emotional regulation, and social identity. Cultural norms and expectations guide how children interact with others, how they express emotions, and how they form relationships. For instance, some cultures may prioritize collectivism, cooperation, and interdependence, while others may emphasize individualism, assertiveness, and independence. These cultural norms influence a child's social development and their understanding of social roles and responsibilities.

Language Development

Language is a fundamental aspect of culture and plays a crucial role in child development. Children learn language through their cultural environment, including the language spoken at home, the social norms around language use, and the cultural context in which they are raised. Different cultures have unique language structures, grammar, and vocabulary, which influence how children acquire and use language. For example, some cultures may emphasize direct communication, while others may value indirect communication or

nonverbal cues. Language also reflects cultural values, beliefs, and traditions, which shape a child's worldview and communication style.

Perspectives on Child Development

Culture also influences the perspectives and beliefs about child development held by different societies and communities. Cultural perspectives on child development encompass ideas, theories, and beliefs about how children grow, learn, and develop. These perspectives can vary widely across cultures and can impact parenting practices, educational approaches, and social norms around child-rearing. For example, some cultures may prioritize early independence and self-sufficiency in children, while others may emphasize interdependence and communal care. Understanding the diverse cultural perspectives on child development is essential for professionals working with children to provide culturally sensitive and inclusive care and support. So, culture influences Child Development or perspective of child development.

Recognizing Cultural Influences on Child Development

Culture influences development from the moment a child is born, making an impact on how he grows. For instance, culture can affect how children build values, language, belief systems, and an understanding of themselves as individuals and as members of society. Culture is the theme that a society holds as a representation of its core traits and values, alongside its tangible and intangible prospects. (Kartik. 2019). Children can receive these cultural influences in different ways, such as through their parents, their environment, and the media. How society shows an understanding of diverse cultures can impact a child's development in many ways, such as how they have confidence in themselves or how comfortable they are in interacting with others.

Parental Cultural Influences on Child Development

Parental culture can influence their children's development. Cultural values often influence the way parents raise their children, including how they discipline and set boundaries. It makes sense that parents raise their children based on cultural influences because they are preparing them to develop behaviours necessary to operate and thrive in that culture. However, when the social environment and home culture differ, developmental issues can arise. In Nigerian culture, respect for elders is highly valued and seen as a cornerstone of good behaviour. Children are taught from a young age to respect their elders and to show deference to those who are older and wiser. This respect is demonstrated through simple actions such as using formal language when addressing elders and avoiding eye contact as a sign of respect. Parental cultural influences can impact how they discipline a child's behaviour. This, in turn, can affect a child's development, particularly if those methods of discipline differ from the dominant culture and tradition (Diana & Marssa, 2022). Child development can be influenced if parents or teachers discipline children according to the dominant culture. Cultural differences in interactions between adults and children also influence how a child behaves socially. For instance, in Nigerian culture, where parents assume much responsibility and authority over children, parents interact with children in a more authoritative manner and demand obedience from their children. Children growing up in such environments are more likely to comply with their parents' requests, even when they are reluctant to do so.

Parental Influences on Children's Social Behaviour Varies by Culture

Culture can also impact parenting behaviours in fundamental ways. Although promoting the development of skills necessary to function effectively in one's community, to the best of one's abilities, is a universal goal of parenting, the specific skills necessary vary widely from culture to culture. According to Diana and Marssa (2022), parents have different goals for their children that partially depend on their culture. For example, parents vary in how much they emphasize goals for independence and individual achievements and goals involving maintaining harmonious relationships and being embedded in a strong network of social relationships. Children learn how to act by interacting with their parents. For this reason, the parents' cultural background often influences a child's behaviour. Children tend to communicate in a way that resembles their parents' way of communicating, and diverse cultures converse and explain things in different ways. These cultural influences on children's language development can help or hinder them on the playground, and later in the workplace. If children's culture is respected at school, including the way the children interact verbally with others, then they'll be more likely to experience the acceptance and respect they need to grow and develop. They are more likely to become adults with a healthy self-image who feel understood and capable of confident, fruitful interactions. If not, however, they may become adults who hesitate to raise their voices and be heard for fear of being ridiculed or misunderstood.

Media and Technology Influences on Childhood Development

Media and technology also play a significant role in shaping childhood development and are influenced by culture. Media, such as television, movies, and social media, can transmit cultural values, norms, and stereotypes to children. Technology, such as computers, smartphones, and video games, can also shape a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Different cultures may have different norms and values related to media and technology use, which can influence a child's exposure and engagement with these forms of media. In addition, while video games can help children develop visual processing skills, they can also yield aggressive behaviour. The effects on cognitive skills and behaviours are often specific to the games played. Parents should regulate children's media consumption with a focus on providing educational media content and encouraging reading habits. The connection with cultural background is clear: Diverse cultures have different attitudes toward Television and other entertainment media, as well as different abilities to afford access to such media. A child from a collectivist culture, for example, may be encouraged to help infant or elderly family members in lieu of watching educational TV after school. Indirectly, culture influences these children's ability to benefit from such experiences. In addition, to take the example further, children whose culture discourages educational TV and other media may be ridiculed by school peers for missing out on popular pastimes other children engage in.

Understanding Cultural Influence on Childhood Development

Understanding the role of culture in child development is essential for parents, caregivers, educators, and policymakers to ensure that children are nurtured and supported within their cultural context. Educators, parents, caregivers, and social workers need to understand how children's cultural influences affect their development. With this knowledge, adults can better guide students of different cultures and backgrounds through their growth processes

and ensure that they are being exposed to healthy influences. Because children in different cultures differ in how they think about themselves and relate to others, they also memorize events differently. They can also provide them with the tools they need to cope with negative influences, such as cultural biases and prejudices against diverse cultures, in schools and in society at large. Educators and social workers need to be aware of their own implicit biases about cultural differences. As the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) reported, teachers can exhibit biases in their treatment of children according to the child's race, ability, socioeconomic status, and behaviours. The biases can inhibit teachers from effectively helping these students and, therefore, prevent students from developing at the pace that's best for them. By understanding the cultural influences on child development, including their own cultural biases, professionals in these roles can better make an impact on children's lives and deliver the care they need.

Conclusion

In conclusion, culture plays a crucial role in shaping child development in diverse ways. It influences a child's beliefs, values, language, socialization, parenting styles, gender roles, play, education, traditions, and perspectives on child development. Culture provides the framework within which children learn about the world, develop their identity, and navigate their social environment. It is crucial to recognize and respect the diverse cultural contexts in which children grow up, as it has a profound impact on their overall development. In this way culture influence Child Development. The importance of a solid foundation in cultural education is obvious. Early Childhood education is where the foundation of the culture is laid. Poor performance in other areas and levels of life can also be traced to this foundation. So, a thorough knowledge of what and how education is handled at this level is imperative.

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