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Implications of Montessori's Child-Initiated Approach for Early Childhood Education in Nigeria.

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Abstract
This paper examines Maria Montessori's child-initiated approach to learning as an alternative pedagogical framework for enhancing knowledge acquisition among young learners. Drawing on Montessori's philosophy of self-construction, experiential learning, and prepared environments, the paper explores how child-centred activities, hands-on engagement, independent exploration, and guided discovery foster holistic development and lifelong learning. The discussion highlights the epistemological foundations of Montessori education, emphasizing the dynamic relationship among the child, the teacher, and the prepared learning environment. The paper further analyzes the relevance and implications of Montessori's child-initiated approach for Nigerian early childhood education, arguing that it aligns with the National Policy on Education's emphasis on play-based learning. It concludes that effective implementation of Montessori principles through teacher training, provision of appropriate learning materials, and child-centred classroom practices can promote creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, self-confidence, and independent learning among Nigerian children. The study recommends the wider adoption of Montessori's child-initiated approach as a strategy for improving educational outcomes and fostering the holistic development of young learners in Nigeria.
Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Montessori Method, Child-Initiated Learning, Knowledge Acquisition, Play-Based Learning, Holistic Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a practice that has been in existence ever since man existed on earth planet. At the birth of a child, the caring and training begins, first within the immediate family and after a while, the extended family members join. Early childhood education is often considered to begin at conception, when parents interact with the foetus in

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the womb through soothing or playful verbal communication. After birth, parents, siblings continue this early learning by supporting the child's development of sitting, crawling and early speech. This typically begins with familiarising the child with the names of family members, everyday household objects and basic necessities such as water, food and clothing. This early training extends beyond the parents, to other members of the family and neighbours. As the child grows, the mother often entrusts the child to others while attending to activities such as marketing, farming, social engagements, assisting friends or seeking medical care, including childbirth which may keep her away from extended periods constituted the traditional, informal form of early childhood education in Nigeria prior to the introduction of formal early childhood education by Western missionaries and colonial administration which typically begins between the ages of 3 to 7 years. At this developmental stage in life, learning rates vary considerably, as children acquire skills at different paces. This is due to the fact that, they are cognitively wired differently, and they come from different family backgrounds. These among other reasons indicate why there is no consensual method of acquiring knowledge among young learners.

Most early childhood education centres utilize different methods of teaching young learners. As noted by Nwogoh (2024), a prevalent approach in many Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres involves keeping children seated for extended periods to memorize and recite numbers and letters according to the teacher's directives. This is a conventional method that runs through most nursery and primary school in Nigeria. In order to ensure that a greater number of children acquire knowledge more effectively. Montessori proposed the following Child-initiated method of learning for young learners.

Montessori's Child-initiated Approach to Learning in Early Childhood Education

Montessori's child-initiated approach provides a carefully prepared learning environment in which children independently select activities based on their interest. This allows children to make their own choices, learn and develop at their own pace to build confidence, independence and self-esteem which creates the foundation for life-long learning. This is done freely and playfully. Originally developed by Italian physician Maria Montessori, this holistic approach aims at developing children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive abilities through exploring the world around them and using their imagination. Central to the Montessori Method of teaching is the view that children have the best capacity to learn during the early

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years, from birth up until they are six years old. This method of education according to Ruhl (2021), is based on self-directed activity, hands-on learning and collaborative play. Nasution (2021) noted that using Montessori in the classrooms children initiate and make creative choices in their learning, while the teacher offers age-appropriate activities to guide the process. Children work in groups and individually to discover and explore knowledge of the world and to develop their maximum potential. According to Swiderski (2011) Montessori is observations revealed that experiential learning within early childhood classroom fosters a more profound grasp of language, mathematics, science, music, social interaction and nature.

Montessori's child-initiated learning places the young learner at the core of the learning process. She believed that children's development unfolds inherently; all that is needed is to create a prepared environment that will support their lead. The prepared environment as argued by Feez (2009), offers the child opportunities to commit to interesting and freely chosen work, which brings out long periods of concentration that should not be interrupted. Practically, this means that the child learns to focus on his/her interests whilst the teacher ensures that these interests encompass all aspects of the curriculum. The child as recommended by McKenzie and Zascavage (2021), should be presented with a lesson accompanied with concrete, self-correcting learning materials that are ordered and well displayed on shelves ranging from the simple to the complex, in a carefully prepared environment designed for their particular development stage.

With the range of activities and resources available to them, children have the opportunity to engage with any activity of their choice and can engage in it for as long as they like rather than having a set timetable for the day. The learning resources within the environment of learning or classroom are organized by subject area, such as language or mathematics, and are freely available to the child to interact with. Although children have the freedom to explore the learning environment as they wish, order and structure are recognised as important parts to enable children to thrive. As soon a child finishes with a particular activity, he/she is taught to take the responsibility of putting learning aids back in its place before moving on.

The resources and activities in a Montessori classroom support all domains of a child's development. Examples include sensory learning by using natural materials such as wood instead of plastic, to open-ended activities outdoors like tyres and planks of wood. With

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Montessori's hands-on learning philosophy, children are encouraged to follow their natural instincts and respond to whatever comes to their minds, provoking creative choices from natural curiosity. This is highly achievable with a teacher who understands children's development and the Montessori teaching method, and has adequate knowledge of the child's interests and learning styles and thus makes learning worthwhile for young learners.

Montessori teaching strategies are based on the idea that, given a developmentally appropriate learning environment, children thrive when allowed to explore materials activities of interest, and investigate them. Montessori (2007) termed this type of learning self-construction. This implies that Montessori's child-initiated learning can also be referred as self-construction where children learn by constructing their own knowledge under the guidance Montessorian teacher who is knowledgeable in the Montessorian method of learning and teaching. Her observation of children led her to the belief that children are capable of learning through their construction of knowledge. This led her to promote an educational approach that guides children in preparing for adult life by helping them become knowledgeable, aware of their environment and socially conscious individuals who strives universal peace (Montessori, 1992).

In Marshall (2017) noted that by 2007 it had become evident that supporting the child's process of self-construction requires teacher whose role and dispositions are consistent with principles underpinning Montessori education. In her writing, she refers to the teacher as a director or directress indicating that the role is to direct the child on the path of self-construction. Such a teacher requires certain qualities which Montessori (1991, 2007) identified as the ability to stand back from the child and give him/her the opportunity to make choices reflecting his/her interests. The child who benefits from such attitudes grows to be the leader of his/her own learning without the overbearing influence of the teacher. This approach is particularly relevant to young children, whose sense of self-worth is built around their autonomy and growing competence, which is usually the result of opportunities to repeat and perfect skills and activities. This autonomy guides the child towards initiative and the ability to embrace challenge and risk-taking - qualities to be encouraged in the children of today, who live with such constraints on their personal freedom.

Maynard, Waters, and Clement (2013) strongly believed that babies and young children are powerful learners; they explore, learn and make out sense of their experiences with other

people, objects and events. Thus, children are naturally drawn to play especially when it is initiated by them. Child-initiated activities are at the heart of early learning. It is learning activity that children initiate themselves, as opposed to learning activity that is initiated and directed by adults. Children select their own activities, and adults participate rather than lead them. According to Bodrova and Leong (2003), child-initiated learning involves cognitive, social, and physical learning that is within the reach or limit of the child's abilities. It involves the inside-out learning of discovery and thinking about experience and the outside-in learning that comes from interaction with other people. Rather than controlling these activities. Child-initiated learning shows how a creative approach to learning that allows for spontaneous adventures in play through child-led projects can lead to rich learning experiences that build on children's own interests.

Hohmann and Weikart (1995) argued that child-initiated learning characterized by children's direct and immediate experiencing with objects, people, ideas, and events, is a fundamental to cognitive restructuring and thus critical for developmental progress. Put simply, young children construct concepts, develop ideas and generate symbolic representation through self-initiated activities that involve movement, listening, exploration, tactile engagement, and manipulation of materials. Kimberley (2016) adds that when such activities occur children are able to functions as participant-observer, make it possible for the child to be engage intrinsically interesting experiences that may lead to contradictory conclusions and, consequent settings, a reorganization of their understanding of the world.

In classrooms settings, Hohmann, Weikart, and Epstein (1995) reported that children are active agents who construct their own knowledge of the world. They do this by transforming their ideas and interactions into logical and intuitive sequences of thought and action, engaging with diverse materials to create personally meaningful experiences and outcomes, and describing these experiences in their own words. Child-initiated learning as reported by Hohmann, et al (1995), depends on the use of educative and safe materials and objects, including natural and found items, household objects, toys, equipment, and tools. Initiated learning of a child begins as young children manipulate objects, using their bodies and all their senses to find out about the objects. Acting on objects gives children something "real" to think about and discuss with others. Through these types of "concrete" experiences with materials and people, children gradually begin to form abstract concepts. As Flavell (1963) puts it,

"children perform real actions on materials which form the learning base, actions as concrete and direct as the materials can be made to allow" (p.436). Action without objects is not sufficient for learning among young learners. To understand their immediate world, children must interact thoughtfully with it. Children's understanding of the world develops as they carry out actions arising from the need to test ideas or find answers to questions. A young child who reaches for a ball, for example, is pursuing an internal question, such as "He . . . wonder what this thing does?" By acting (grasping, tasting, chewing, dropping, pushing, and rolling) and then reflecting on these actions, the child begins to answer the question and to construct a personal understanding of what balls do. Simply put, a child's actions, and reflections on those actions, result in the development of thought and understanding. Thus, active learning involves both the physical activity of interacting with objects to produce effects and the mental activity of interpreting these effects and fitting the interpretations into a more complete understanding of the world.

At this point as noted by Hohmann and Weikart (1995), the impetus to learn arises from within the child. The child's personal interests, questions, and intentions will thus lead to exploration, experimentation, and the construction of new knowledge and understanding. Learners in child-initiated environments are characterized by curiosity and creativity, often acting as questioners and inventors as they explore and made sense of their world. They generate hypotheses "I wonder how I can build a castle with the Lego block so that I can live in it as a princess or prince block?" and test them out by using and combining materials in a way that makes sense to them. As inventors, children create unique solutions and products: "I tried putting the block together but it keeps falling off, but the chair holding it, it works." with this, the sense of trial and error and persistence is developed and knowledge is acquired at every step of exploring the objects in a prepared learning environment. Another example, is Michelle a child pretending to cook soup like her mummy; after stirring, she tries to cover the pot of "soup" (sand) with a lid. She expects the lid to cover the pot (tin of tomato paste), but instead it falls into the soup. Michelle knows from experience that the lid is supposed to stay on top of the pot, so she decides to place several other lids on the pot until she finds one that fits properly and does not fall into the soup. Through repeated experiences like this, she will learn to consider the size of any cover in relation to the size of an opening. For Katz (1993), learning, even when it involves mistakes, is considered an important process of growing and

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living. This is the sense children learn as they explore the world around them and such explorations provide them avenue for problem solving.

In essence, as children explore in their act of child-initiated learning, they develop new questions, and in their young minds go ahead to theorize answers. From these new answers children formulate new and more advanced theories. In the views of Hohmann, et al (1995), while children's creations may sometimes be messy, unstable, or unrecognizable to adults, the process by which children think about and produce these creations is the way they come to understand their world and in turn acquire knowledge. A child-initiated preschool curriculum is not a laissez-faire approach. It is not the same as giving children "free play" separate from "teaching." Rather, according to Robertson, Kinos, Barbour, Pukk, and Rosqvist (2018), teachers use the power of children's developing ideas, interests, and competencies to promote learning through play, circle-time, and small-group activities. This power is most evident in children's play, as play is the central force in initiating their learning.

The acquisition of knowledge continues throughout life, in and out of the classroom, as long as the individuals stay motivated to learn. This explains why the typical child-initiated classroom buzz with activities and experiences as well as offer quiet time to reflect on these experiences. There is this misconceptionin some quaters as noted by Pattison (2014) that when children are allowed to engage in child-centred learning, it prevents them from learning to sit still and learning using the traditional skills such as memorizing the alphabet. In this same context, it is also believed that the skills needed for what some adults perceive as "real school" are often times overlooked (Elliott, & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2022). Those who hold these notions tend to overlook the importance of play and its importance during child-initiated learning especially for young learners. Even when the child is learning via the traditional method, the place of play cannot be underestimated as reported by Hohmann, et al (1995). For instance, in play and real experiences such as the study of "Ants and Pets" children learn not just beginning letters as alpabets (i.e., when children see that the letter "A" could be a symbol for ant and that "P" might be a symbol for pet), also during child-initiated learning, children are provided the opportunities to learn about social studies, science, reading, writing, and maths, through meaningful, integrated activities.

Implication of Montessori Child-initiated Approach to Nigerian Child

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The uniqueness of Montessori's child-initiated approach to learning and teaching indicates that the method is of great relevance to education globally and most especially in Nigeria. Nigeria as a developing country needs to apply Montessori's child-initiated approach to her early childhood education. This is because; it supports the holistic development of the child. In Nigerian early childhood educational centres, different approaches are being used to teach young learners that is to say, there is no stipulated approach of teaching learners. Chid-initiated approach however, should be used with whatever approach a school seems to be using. This is so, due to the statement in NPE (FRN, 2013), where it was mentioned that "government will ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play…." So whatever method used, play must be embedded in it. Play of course is the main feature of the child-initiated approach for young learners in early childhood education.

Early childhood education is the foundation for other levels of education and as such much attention should be paid it, if it fails the other levels will definitely not stand. The extent of development of any country relies heavily on her education and if the first level which is the early childhood education is not productive in terms of producing a holistic-educated learner then problem will linger throughout other levels. Obiweluozor (2015) opined that, in every modern society it is believed that education is the key to national development and there is the need to maintain efficiency at every level of education especially the pre-primary stage. This is because it is the bedrock upon which all other educational levels are built. Once a child misses that early stage, it is usually difficult for the learner to get back to the basics. Pre-primary education is a common practice in most societies; and they make provision for early childhood education programmes for children below the official school age (usually 6 years) mainly to prepare them for the rigors of primary education and beyond.

Children learn faster and acquire knowledge, if a good approach is rightly employed in teaching them. Early years of learning, among children is the most important stage in a human life, because at this stage, children learn basic things around them and they are cognitively smart. Montessori believes that children can learn not minding their age. Her approach to knowledge acquisition is against the 3Ups used in teaching the 3Rs (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) in early childhood schools. These 3Ups are: Sit Up, Look Up and Shut Up. This is because children enter the classroom with their previous knowledge which they had learnt through experience outside the classroom. They should be given the opportunity to build up

knowledge from these experiences in relation with the activity made available by the facilitator in the classroom.

Epistemologically for Montessori, learning and knowledge acquisition are dependable triangular entities which are the teacher whom she referred to as facilitator or directress, prepared environment and the child, with the child at the top. Simply put, central to Montessori's method of education is the dynamic triangle of child, teacher and prepared environment. The major task of the teacher, the storekeeper of knowledge in the Montessori classroom is to guide the child through learning that is designed to support the child's intellectual, physical, emotional and social development through active exploration, choice and independent learning in the prepared environment. The Montessori educational method is based on two principles: the non-interference with the individuality and expressive freedom of the child, and the use of a specific sensorial training on the early stages of development. These methods are characterized by emphasis on independence, freedom within limits, and respect for a child's natural psychological, physical, and social development and knowledge acquisition. Hence, Montessori epistemological activity is based on the child's inner drive which occurs through the use of materials that provide a concrete representation of an abstract concept and if employed in Nigerian early childhood classrooms easy knowledge acquisition will be made possible. According to Montessori (1992), knowledge is acquired when emphasis is placed on process over product and independent problem solving this will surely produce an educated person. The aftermath is that the child becomes a self-directed learner, not dependent on the adult. The teacher, who is the guide of the child, shows the way to unlocking the door to the environment, thus enabling the child to reach their full potential. Montessori philosophy of learning approach ignites a love of learning, because it encourages resilience, responsibility, self-confidence, teamwork, problem-solving skills as well as creative and scientific thinking among young learners of Nigerian society. It will benefit Nigerian learners if Montessori's approach is adopted for her young learner's classrooms.

Montessori being an empiricist, advocated for sensual learning among young learners through the use of learning objects. Montessori's approach is from perception to conception based on the use of didactical materials, and their choice and interest based on play. At this point, it will be right to say that Montessori upheld the view that children learn the contents of subject taught and acquire knowledge through experience, made available by their teachers.

Montessori's pedagogical contents share some similarity with constructivist process where learning is carried out with the use of learning materials rather than through direct instruction that is theoretical teaching oriented and it also includes young learners' choice in the materials provided, free movement in the classroom, and learning at one's own pace.

Conclusion

Child-initiated approach as a method advocated by Montessori will be of great impact if it is rightly used. This involves training of teachers on how to correctly employ Montessori Method in teaching young learners and providing the children with the objects of learning. Early Childhood Education being the foundation of learning and the usage of the formidable method which Montessori advocated for will ensure long life knowledge acquisition among young learners in Nigeria.

As a developing country, Nigeria needs to fully introduce Montessori Child-initiated Approach to learning for early childhood education in order to produce an educated child, a child who knows 'the how' and 'the that'. Montessori's child-initiated approach provides young learner the opportunity to acquire knowledge through experience while manipulating learning objects made available in the classroom. This will necessarily give birth to a self-confident, self-motivated, intelligent, social being, emotionally balanced and a creative learner. It is a tool; child-initiated learning will indispensably bring to the light the child's critical, cooperative, collaborative, and independent abilities for the healthy, integral development of the individual and the society at large.

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