
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trends, Issues, and Challenges on Early Childhood Programs: Shaping Sustainable Future for Children

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| ABSTRACT

This study examined different materials and articles that are connected with the experiences, observations, and insights of the researchers. They analyzed the current challenges and changes in the implementation of early childhood programs that affect the lives and learning of children. Through critical analysis of the materials and introspection of their own reflections and insights, the researchers were able to come up with conclusions and insights that could help educators, administrators, social workers, and volunteers to have a clear picture of the situations, contexts, and challenges being faced by those who have direct engagement with children. Moreover, trends, issues, and problems were also discussed so that researchers of this paper could offer sound and sustainable proposals that could identify the needs and diversities of children and the programs suitable to the existing needs and diversities.

| KEYWORDS

Early childhood programs, trends and issues, classroom experience, collaboration, service learning, homeschooling

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1. Introduction

The child is the center of the teaching and learning process. The future of the world depends on children. There are programs that offer various activities, lessons, and training designed for the development and empowerment of children.

From our observation, the existing needs of my community where there is an early childhood program are: social and emotional aspect (learners feel bored and anxious due to usual and frantic routine), poor vocabulary, lack of time of parents to supervise children, and difficulty in understanding course modules. More so, when we interviewed parents, most of them shared how laborious to teach their children lessons in English, Maths, Science, and other subjects due to limited knowledge and busy schedule.

Education works to empower children and youth. They can now see future opportunities and directions with the learnings they gain. We made mention of the need in our place, we are seeing many children who are not attending school, and we feel sad for them because if they only have access to education, their future might be saved and shaped.

From the stories and videos, we watched, we have realized how essential and relevant an alternative learning system is also the value of offering home education to children who do not have the means to attend formal schooling due to poverty and work.

The main goal of this study is to narrate the experiences of the teachers in doing community service by linking their skills to the needs of people and identifying one sustainable development goal.

We can also have our actions and steps to help children through various causes and initiatives. We would like to propose a webinar that will educate parents on how they could properly and sensibly participate in their children's homeschooling. We have realized our role in making education quality and inclusive, which is pivotal in making the lives of children meaningful and fruitful.

This paper aims to examine and describe the existing and perennial issues and challenges among early childhood programs in the local setting. It also offers insightful ideas and tips on how stakeholders and partner agencies could address the said issues and problems.

2. Literature Review

In studying child development, it is a must that aspiring caregivers and ECE specialists will have a grasp of the principles of child development. The main beliefs serve as a framework to understand how children develop and the foundation they go through.

The first principle is the *child develops as a whole*. This denotes that we have to consider all the domains or areas of development of the child. We can observe how the child grows and develops. The important aspects we are looking into include cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical aspects.

The second principle is *development follows predictable patterns*. This indicates that children acquire skills and reach milestones based on predictable patterns. Further, research claims that development is sequential and cumulative. We can support the child's development by planning and framing the experiences that will provide them with challenges and happy experiences essential to their development.

The next principle is *rates of development vary*. This is interpreted as uniqueness in the rate of development. It also highlights the fact that even twins do not have the same level of progress and therefore are distinct in some ways. It is imperative to underscore that what the child does and understands today can serve as a basis for future development.

Development is influenced by maturation, and experience is the fourth principle. This principle elucidates the fact that development is a result of the interplay between maturation and experience. (Feeney et al. 2010)

Development proceeds from the top-down and from the center outward. The physical activities of the child and motor development are explained and supported by this principle.

Culture affects development. The last two principles are also important because they guide parents, teachers, and other practitioners on how children grow and other variables they need to look into that may affect children's learning and behaviour. Achieving knowledge on theories of child development and principles can help the teacher design appropriate instructional materials and provide a healthy and safe teaching environment for the children.

Most likely, something needs to be modified to cause changes and leaps among future early childhood education practitioners and teachers. Further training of staff and identifying their needs can lead to better work conditions and can help them provide the well-being of children and staff (Boyd, 2020).

The quality of early childhood care and program depends on the capacity and effectiveness of the staff and program (Torii et al., 2017). Movitz and Holmes (2007) narrated their experiences in teaching high school, where they incorporated learning galleries while handling a medieval unit. One key point in their reflection is that learners don't outgrow their love of learning through hands-on and multiple tasks. They witnessed improved learner participation and more fruitful experiences through team-based activities. Fielder and Brent (2007) provided thoughtful reasons as to why cooperative learning is attainable and effective. Students can learn better by performing something dynamic rather than simply sitting and listening. They also believe that collaborative learning guides smarter students, who are put in the position of explaining and summarising concepts to team members who contribute to the team's success.

Through pragmatism, we are able to encourage among our students the value of problem-solving and critical thinking. They are grouped to discuss ideas, solve problems, and socialize. This makes a difference because when students are engaged, effective mastery and learning take place. In a world where the paradigm is outcomes-based, we need evidence of learning achievement; thus, pragmatics is helpful because it shows the context of what is really happening and how the teacher and student construct wise and realistic decisions. Students of today have to be sensitive and aware of the cultures and diversities of others to maintain harmony and intercultural communication (Ornstein & Levine, 2003).

Being seasoned teachers, we seldom administer formal and standardized tests. For us, testing only covers a certain aspect of the learner. It has a limited scope, even if the type of test is multiple choice. The big question is, "Does failing a test mean a student

is not capable? Definitely not. This view is also backed by Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which goes, "No test can accurately determine the nature or quality of a person's intelligence. As Gardner has repeatedly pointed out, standardized tests measure only a small part of the total spectrum of abilities. The best way to assess your own multiple intelligences, therefore, is through a realistic appraisal of your performance in the many kinds of tasks, activities, and experiences associated with each intelligence" (Armstrong, 2018).

3. Methodology

This research undertaking required the use of the qualitative method in order to examine and describe the existing issues and trends in early childhood programs. The researchers discussed and shared their experiences and observations while they carefully analyzed the collected data from various sources in the form of related literature. In achieving processing, the essential and salient data, they intentionally combined and connected information from the literature and the perspectives and reflections they possess. Eventually, through brainstorming and consultation, they were able to create synthesis from the reliable and trusted ideas that were crystalized during discussions and analysis. In the end, problems, issues, and challenges on the different early childhood education programs were discovered and identified. To address such issues, the researchers offered their thoughts, reflections, and insights that could guide and orient stakeholders on possible programs they could design to reduce or alleviate the problems.

4. Results and Discussion

In analyzing the needs and concerns of the parents, children, and teachers, we decided to make informal conversations with them. We found out that many parents are having difficulties teaching and handling the homeschooling of children. They can hardly discuss modules due to insufficient knowledge and lack of time. Furthermore, due to fear of going out and limited outdoor activities, some children experience social-emotional concerns. Assessment in modules cannot easily be answered by children even if parents are there. In addition, teachers need to do a collaboration with parents for the success of the home learning modality. Teachers also have concerns about how they can reach out to children and parents.

We have ensured that objectives and needs are congruent and aligned. This aspect is evident in the program that is to be implemented where parents and teachers are involved. Even the resources, materials, schedule, and evaluation tools are connected to objectives and needs.

In all undertakings and activities we will do, we will seek permission from authorities and observe health protocols. In case onsite or physical meetings are already allowed, that is the time when we will consider changing the platform or scheduling a face-to-face seminar with my subject participants. In the evaluation phase, we sought to request parents to submit a photo as evidence of the outcome, and if time is enough, we might make a short conversation with them to get feedback. On the other hand, teachers will write a reflection paper about the webinar. The results of the outcomes and evaluation could lead to the design of a home learning/education model in the future with key points and benefits.

We would like to emphasize that all our objectives, activities, platform, methods, evaluation, and outcomes are clearly anchored on the existing needs and problems of the community, especially on children, parents, and teachers.

In the development of our proposed program, we have intentionally read "Understanding the Challenge" and "The Preparation Gap" from the book of Price (2008), which details various steps in connecting education to community needs, including the steps and processes to achieve the goals. More so, we also reviewed "Creating Civic Engagement" from the work of Korgen and White (2014) to help us design objectives and procedures with consideration to culture and community aspects.

During the presentation, participation, and evaluation, the language of the community is considered to make the program comprehensible and feasible, as well as to recognize culture and ethnicity. The contents and objectives of the program are contextualized on the needs, problems, and culture of the subject-participants.

On the whole, the outcome of this extension project (*service-learning*, in other contexts) will benefit teachers, parents, and children. Children are the center of the learning process while parents and teachers collaborate to effectively facilitate home learning. When they are aware of their roles and duties, they can adjust to whatever circumstances they are in. They can converse, collaborate, and reflect on the issues and needs surrounding and emanating from their setting. After all, in any community extension (whatever the terms being used), the needs of people are met and addressed through quality services and programs.

We can only design a brighter future if we start from the foundation of the children. Administrators have laborious moments in sustaining quality and responsive early childhood education programs, especially in the sudden shift of modality, which is online distance education—one of the issues that schools offer early childhood programs and courses in teacher preparation. We know for a fact how challenging it is to handle kids, so we have to develop and ignite among trainees and aspiring early childhood

teachers the values and passion for teaching. The future of the world depends on the children as they say, as such qualified and effective teachers should be assigned to handle children.

Gone are the days when we had many early childhood teachers who were obedient and submissive when it comes to adherence to school policies and guidelines, although in the current time, we have few teachers who still possess such patience and obedience. Others seem to be complaisant of anything and everything. We firmly believe that the curriculum and instruction among higher education institutions must be revisited and evaluated.

Another challenge seen and felt is ceased of operations among private learning centers due to health crises. In the report I watched on television, about 2,000 private schools decided to cease operations because of unstable and unsteady enrolment figures. This news is quite alarming; however, we cannot blame some parents and families for shifting or transferring from private to public schools due to unemployment and a struggling economy.

From our perspectives, we suggest that local authorities and national policymakers, with the aid of the Department of Education, should study and examine the situation so that they can formulate new guidelines and policies to uplift and support learning centres. Despite remote learning and distance education devised by the government, there is no assurance if quality teaching and learning is implemented. Let us face it, kids or children are not yet the kind of independent learners we have in higher grade levels. They still need guidance, support, and supervision. Other than cognitive and psychomotor skills we have been aiming to cultivate among our learners, we have to ensure inclusion and collaboration in the class that could tap their potentials and shape their social, emotional aspects.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

For others, the term sustainable may not be feasible if the resources and skills are not controllable. However, if collaboration and reflection are maintained in any partnership, the goals can be achieved and retained. Planning for a community extension project requires dedication, patience, cooperation, and reflection, among others. Participants of this project showed how collective efforts could make a big difference. Parents, teachers, administration and stakeholders have to meet and discuss plans for community extension so that problems and issues can be foreseen and directions for the plans are carefully and intellectually drafted.

If sustainable development goals are addressed and met by the globe, we can see bright, healthy, and nurtured kids around the world. They are among those beneficiaries of the blueprint, which focuses on social, economic, and environmental concerns. If the 17 goals are addressed, then the world we live in shall ever be more beautiful and peaceful.

We can combat any obstacles we face that might hamper the learning and development of children. Consequently, children can enjoy their rights which are listed on UNICEF and other platforms on child protection, promotion, and foundation. The world should still be a healthy and conducive place for children to inhabit and thrive in. This is only possible and feasible if we, as a steward of the world will help our leaders and other sectors in mitigating the ill effects of global warming and climate change. We need to protect children from all variables and issues that may hamper their learning and development. We need to identify issues and launch projects that could save the children from all harmful situations.

If the Philippines has achieved sustainable development goals, then our children would have a safe, engaging, and meaningful learning environment and active learning and development. As we travel in many local areas in the Philippines, we see many children who are out-of-school and begging for alms. They seem to have a dark future if nobody would provide them shelter, food, potable water, education and other necessities that can shape their future.

Filipino children are flexible, critical, analytic, and prudent once our country has achieved the SGDs. They can face and meet other nationalities without fear and hesitations because they have been trained and exposed to different realities and insights they need to become effective communicators and stewards of the earth. Another picture we have in mind is to teach children sustainable development goals by infusing in the lessons the practices, concepts, and information that can guide and orient them on that aspect.

Through our creativity and patience, we can gradually inform children about the importance of being involved and engaged in addressing the SDGs, but it should be in a careful and supportive method or approach. Check the readiness of the children, and from that angle, you can start narrating or sharing what specific tasks members of the community can do to address the SDGs. It is wise if, in our curricula, syllabus, and lesson plans, an activity that brings the thoughts of children on SDGs will be inserted. We have to ensure that anywhere and everywhere, nobody, no child is left behind, so we need to adapt to the changing environment and diversity of learning.

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