RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND ACQUISITION OF LITERACY SKILLS AMONG PRESCHOOLERS IN PUBLIC EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE CENTRES IN ELEME LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

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Abstract

This study is focused on the relationship between creative expression and acquisition of literacy skills among preschoolers in Public Early Childhood Care Centres in Eleme Local Government Area. The study adopted the correlational research design. Two purposes, two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. 2071 preschoolers found in 21 Public Early Childhood Care Centre in Eleme Local Government Area constituted the population of this study, from where 890 preschoolers representing approximately 43% of the population were sampled using simple random sampling technique through balloting-with-replacement. The instrument that was used for data collection was the researcher-designed 22 items questionnaire titled: Creative Expression and Acquisition of Literacy Skills Questionnaire (CEALSQ). Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to answer the research questions and to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The study revealed that, there is significant relationship between painting, scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in Public Early Childhood Education Centres in Eleme Local Government Area. Based on the findings, it was recommended that: preschoolers should be given appropriate materials to use in painting exercises to enable them acquire the necessary literacy skills. Preschoolers should be given materials, rough papers to scribble in order to acquire proper sense of letters and number formation.

Keywords: *Creative Expression, Literacy Skills, Preschoolers*

Introduction

The Early Childhood Education Centres are learning facilities put in place to enable preschoolers have organized learning and development under the auspices of the caregivers. It is necessary that being at the centre, every preschooler should be able to acquire and develop all milestones and skills needed for future learning, since the early childhood stage serves as the cradle for growth and development. Literacy skills acquisition stands at the core of education, serving as the foundation for communication, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. UNESCO (2017) recognizes literacy as a complex set of abilities that involve not only written information but also critically evaluating and creating content. In this work, literacy skills is seen to manifest as preschoolers' ability to; identify letters, differentiate between two distinct sounds, phonemic awareness and blending of sound to form words. Basically, literacy skills in a child, involves their ability to identify letters, differentiate between two distinct sounds blend two or more letters together to make meaning. The first stage of literacy development is ability of nursery school preschoolers to identify letters. The identification of letter, such as capital letters and small letters in a word is an essential literacy skill. By being able to identify the capital and small letters preschoolers increase their ability to notice such letters eventually in familiar words (e.g., the first letter in their name, letters in other familiar words or names).

Another important literacy skill to be required by preschoolers is phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability of a child to differentiate between two distinct sounds. And this involves the teacher stretching out each sound, practically when the teacher says a word the pupils repeat the sounds. For example, the teacher says a three- or four-phonemic word such as cat or lamp. Preschoolers play a clapping game with the teacher or another child. They clap or touch hands as they say the individual sounds in the word. The blending of letters is a skill needed to slide sounds together in order to pronounce words correctly.

According to Joe (2022), beginner readers find it difficult to hear how a group of separate sounds are blended to form a word, would not be able to pronounce words or read sentences. Simply put, the blending skill is the act of breaking words apart into their sounds. Firstly, when preschoolers hear a word they will first have to break the word into its component sounds, after which they blend the sounds together to form the word been studied. When spelling a word, the preschoolers

will have to conceive the word in their mind, and then break it down into its component sounds, in order to identify the letters needed to spell those sounds. It is observed by the researchers that some preschoolers in public primary schools fall short of literacy skill acquisition. That is to say, they do not develop literacy skills as early as some of their peers. This could have been influenced by different factors; chief amongst them is use of creative expressions by pupils.

Creative expression is the process of making or producing something that is both novel and valuable. It involves the capacity to think outside of conventional frameworks and to bring into existence new forms or configurations that have aesthetic or functional value. On this note, Robinson (2016) sees creative expression as the act of turning new and imaginative ideas into reality. It involves seeing the world in new ways, finding hidden patterns of doing things, making connections between seemingly unrelated concepts and ideas, and providing solutions. Furthermore, Gardener (2021) recounted that creative expression refers to the ability to create work that is both original and appropriate. It can manifest in various domains, including the arts, sciences, and everyday life. It is a complex activity based process that combines originality, imagination, and innovation to getting a finish end. Furthermore, Mihaly (2022), views creative expression as any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. What counts is whether the novelty he or she produces is accepted for inclusion in the domain of learning.

In the view of Sean (2021), creative expressions like drawing, painting, and scribbling allow preschoolers to communicate their ideas and emotions non-verbally. These activities help them articulate thoughts and feelings they might not yet have the vocabulary to express verbally. Engaging in other creative expression such as cutting, gluing, and coloring helps preschoolers develop fine motor skills. These skills are essential for writing and other tasks requiring hand-eye coordination.

Painting helps the preschooler develop symbolic thinking, which is foundational for literacy. When preschoolers paint, they learn to represent objects, ideas, and stories through visual symbols, which parallels the way written language represents spoken words and concepts. Also, Stanley (2018) argued that painting encourages narrative thinking and storytelling in young preschoolers. As preschoolers create paintings, they often narrate what they are depicting, thus practicing oral

language skills and laying the groundwork for written narrative skills. However, Jerome (2015) suggested that painting can serve as a medium for young preschoolers to explore and express their understanding of the world. This form of expression aids cognitive development and language acquisition, as preschoolers describe and discuss their artwork. Halliday (2017) posits that painting activities can enhance literacy skills by integrating visual and verbal modalities. Preschoolers' interactions with their own paintings and others' artworks can enhance their ability to interpret and create meaning out of what they have done, and foster skills that are transferable to reading and writing. Furthermore, Freire (2022) emphasized that when preschoolers paint, they engage in pre-writing activities, developing fine motor skills and understanding the concept of representation, which are crucial for writing development. Freire argues that painting helps preschoolers use language for different functions, such as describing, narrating, and explaining, which are important for literacy.

Painting allows children to differentiate shapes, sizes, and colors, which supports visual discrimination which is an important skill for distinguishing letters and words in print. Children learn to observe spatial relationships, such as left-to-right and top-to-bottom orientations, which are fundamental to reading and writing (Neumann, 2016). The act of painting requires children to coordinate their vision with their hand movements, improving hand-eye coordination. This skill is crucial for tasks such as copying text, spacing letters appropriately, and eventually developing fluent handwriting (Gerde et al., 2015). Furthermore, Brian (2020), noted that fine motor activities, such as painting, directly influence a child's ability to develop writing fluency, an essential component of early literacy development.

Scribbling is considered as exploratory writing, where preschoolers experiment with creating shapes and lines. Scribbling helps preschoolers understand the symbolic nature of writing. Through this activity, they learn about letter formation, directionality, and the concept that written symbols can represent spoken language. Kress (2023) sees scribbling as a multimodal form of communication that combines visual and textual elements. Kress argued that scribbling is a crucial step in literacy development, where preschoolers express their thoughts in what can be called unintelligent lines. Scribbling help preschoolers understand the interplay between different modes of communication, such as visual and textual, enhancing their ability to interpret and create

meaning through various forms. Joshua and Okogba (2024) maintained that scribbling is a pre-writing activity that upon which other literacy skills of preschoolers are hinged.

In the view of Brian (2020), scribbling is defined as an exploratory activity where preschoolers create marks that resemble writing. As such, Brian highlighted the role of scribbling in helping preschoolers develop the fine motor skills necessary for writing and to begin understanding the connection between written symbols and their meanings. On the other hand, Sucic (2017) sees scribbling as a precursor to writing, where preschoolers experiment with making marks on paper. Sucic further emphasizes the importance of scribbling in early literacy development. It allows preschoolers to practice the physical aspects of writing and to begin understanding the symbolic nature of written language. Furthermore, Neuman (2020) views scribbling as an early form of writing where preschoolers make marks that represent their thoughts and ideas. Over time, scribbles evolve into recognizable shapes, patterns, and eventually letters. It provides opportunity for them to practice making marks and to begin understanding that writing is a tool for communication. The way preschoolers acquire literacy skills cannot be done without a pronounced theory backing it. Research by Rowe (2018) suggests that early exposure to free-form writing activities aids in letter recognition and the ability to form words, which are critical components of literacy development. Scribbling require controlled hand movements, which strengthen the small muscles in children's fingers, hands, and wrists. These fine motor skills are essential for grasping writing tools and forming letters accurately (Puranik & Lonigan, 2014). Engaging in activities such as finger painting, using crayons, or making brushstrokes prepares children for the mechanics of handwriting.

This work is hinged on theory of reading acquisition by Uta Frith (1985). In Frith's theory, preschoolers acquire literacy by moving through particular stages that are developmental and associated with both age and experience. Frith include three stages of reading acquisition in the model. The first stage, the logographic stage, is characterized by instant recognition of symbols, images, or words. In the second stage, the alphabetic stage, preschoolers begin to use letter symbols to represent the sounds they hear in individual words. Preschoolers in this stage demonstrate an emerging understanding of sound and symbol relationships. The third stage, preschoolers begin to blend sounds and commence reading.

This theory is considered relevant to the study as literacy skill involves the recognition of symbols, images and words which could be acquired through painting and drawing. The theory holds that preschoolers develop literacy skill as they begin to associate letter symbols with sounds. This in effect help them build the ability to read and write which are major determinant of literacy skill. However, the researchers observed that some preschoolers seem not to exhibit the required literacy skills expected despite the effort of caregivers. It is therefore necessary to ask; could it be that these preschoolers do not carry out creative expression? What then is the relationship between creative expression and acquisition of literacy skills among preschoolers?

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between creative expression and literacy skills acquisition of preschoolers in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area of Rivers State. Specifically, the study will;

1. Determine the relationship between painting and the acquisition of literacy skill by preschoolers in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area of Rivers State.
2. Ascertain the relationship between scribbling and the acquisition of literacy skills by preschoolers in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the relationship between painting and acquisition of literacy skills by preschoolers in early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area?
2. What is the relationship between scribbling and acquisition of literacy skills by preschoolers in early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area?

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses was tested at a significant level of 0.05

1. There is no significant relationship between painting and the acquisition of literacy skills by preschoolers in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area.
2. There is no significant relationship between scribbling and acquisition of literacy skills by preschoolers in early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area

Research Methods

This study was carried out in early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area of Rivers State. It focused on relationship between creative expression and literacy skills acquisition of preschoolers in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area of Rivers State. Two objectives, two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. The research design adopted for this study was the correlational research design. 2071 preschoolers found in 21 Public Early Childhood Care Centre in Eleme Local Government Area will constitute the population of this study. This is because the preschoolers are those who carry out creative expression; and they also are the ones to acquire literacy skills. 890 preschoolers representing approximately 43% of the entire population constitutes the sample size for the study using simple random sampling technique through balloting-with-replacement. The instrument that was used for data collection in this study was the researcher-designed 22 items questionnaire which was validated and titled: Creative Expression and Acquisition of Literacy Skills Questionnaire (CEALSQ). Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to answer the research questions and to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public Early Childhood Centres in Eleme Local Government Area?

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in Public Early Childhood Centres in Eleme Local Government Area.

Table 1: Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation on the relationship between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills

		Painting	Preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills
Painting	Pearson Correlation	1	.810**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	877	877
Preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills	Pearson Correlation	.810**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	877	877

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 shows that the p-value of Pearson's Product Moment Correlation between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills as .000 which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis one is rejected and therefore stated thus: there is a significant relationship between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public early childhood centres in Eleme Local Government Area.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public Early Childhood Centres in Eleme Local Government Area?

Ho_2: There is no significant relationship between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public Early Childhood Centres in Eleme Local Government Area.

Table 2: Summary of Pearson's Product Moment Correlation on the relationship between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills

		Scribbling	Preschoolers' Acquisition of Literacy Skills
Scribbling	Pearson Correlation	1	.509**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	877	877
Preschoolers' Acquisition of Literacy Skills	Pearson Correlation	.509**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	877	877

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows that the p-value of Pearson's Product Moment Correlation between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills as .000 which is less than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis three is rejected and therefore stated thus: there is a significant relationship between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public Early Childhood Centres in Eleme Local Government Area.

Summary of Findings

The following are the findings of this study:

1. There is positive and significant relationship between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area.
2. There is significant and positive relationship between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area.

Discussion of Findings:

The findings in table 1, shows a significant and positive relationship between painting and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local government Area. The issue of painting in early childhood centres cannot be ruled out

from preschoolers' daily activities. Apart from the vibe and fun preschoolers derived from painting, painting also help them develop their fine motor skills which use very important in writing and holding of paint brushes, pencils and crayon. This finding could be due to the fact that preschoolers are always carrying out painting activities. When they paint, they could also paint and appreciate letters they have just painted. Hence, painting exposes them to literacy activities such as letter identification and print awareness among others. This study agrees with the findings of Brian (2020), who noted that fine motor activities, such as painting, directly influence a child's ability to develop writing fluency, an essential component of early literacy development. Painting helps preschoolers develop fine motor control, which is essential for writing. Using brushes, fingers, or other tools to paint helps preschoolers refine the motor skills needed to hold a pencil and form letters. Research by Rowe (2018) shows that activities like painting enhance fine motor development, which is closely linked to the ability to write legibly and form letters correctly, a crucial aspect of literacy.

The finding in table 2 indicated a strong, positive and significant relationship between scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills. The issue of scribbling is one of the early expressions carried out by preschoolers in school. Preschoolers show case their creativity from scribbling exercises. As preschoolers scribble, they try to write mock letters and other literacy skills. This study is in agreement with the findings of Nueman (2020) who showed that the art-based activities such as scribbling promote oral language development, which is critical in building literacy foundations. Also Puranik and Lonigan (2017) asserted that scribbling is a critical stage in early literacy because it helps preschoolers develop the muscle strength and dexterity needed for forming recognizable letters. In their contribution, Joshua and Okogba (2024) maintained that scribbling is a pre-writing activity that upon which other literacy skills of preschoolers are hinged.

Conclusion

This study focused on relationship between creative expression and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills in public early childhood education centres in Eleme Local Government Area. The learning activities that preschoolers are exposed to have gone beyond talk and chalk

approach to hands-on activities. This will integrate the interest and needs of preschoolers into the classroom space for profitable learning experiences. For preschoolers to acquire sound literacy skills, certain activities are needed to boost the skills' acquisition. One of such is creative expression, which has to do with the activities preschoolers carry out with their hands in the classroom; such include painting and scribbling. From the findings so far, it could be concluded that there is a significant relationship between creative expression such as, painting and scribbling and preschoolers' acquisition of literacy skills.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Head teachers should provide preschoolers with appropriate learning materials to use in painting exercises in order to enable them acquire the necessary literacy skills.
2. Caregivers should ensure that preschoolers do not lack materials, rough papers needed to scribble in order to acquire proper writing skills.

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