

CREATING AND SUSTAINING A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

For teaching and learning in school to be interesting, effective and rewarding, the environment needs to be conducive. One of the problems militating against effective teaching and learning in schools at all levels of education is an unhealthy school environment which has been the bane of our schools. This paper centres on creating and sustaining a healthy school environment for effective teaching and learning. It examined the concept of school environment, teaching and learning with a focus on primary education which is the foundation and most important level in the pyramid of education. A healthy environment that enhances and facilitates teaching and learning consists of good physical conditions, psychosocial climate and culture. The paper posited that creating and sustaining a healthy school environment for teaching and learning is achievable through the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders both within and outside the school. Finally, it recommended that all stakeholders should be responsive to the environmental needs and well-being of the schools and play the role expected of them effectively in all its ramifications in order to achieve and sustain a healthy school environment.

INTRODUCTION

For effective teaching and learning to be achieved, one of the issues that must be critically considered is the school environment. The environment is the platform that provides opportunities for teaching and learning as well as related and other ancillary matters. The environment consists of both the visible and invisible, controllable and uncontrollable and the man-made and nature-made elements/matters, all of which can exert influence on teaching and learning. An environment is healthy when it is ideal and conducive for teaching and learning to the extent that the teachers and students are comfortable while performing their duties. For teaching and learning to be effective and result-oriented, there is the need for an healthy environment to be created and sustained in all schools.

Creating and sustaining an healthy school environment that would foster teaching and learning which would lead to the achievement of learning objectives requires commitment from every stakeholders. The school environment is not static but subject to change from time to time. Depending on the change that occurs, if the effect would impact negatively on teaching and learning, school authorities must intervene to restore normalcy. School environment cuts across three levels – primary, secondary and tertiary. The focus of this Paper is on the primary school environment.

CONCEPT OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, TEACHING AND LEARNING

The physical school environment encompasses the school building and all its contents including physical structures, infrastructure, furniture and the use and presence of chemicals, and biological agents, the site on which a school is located and the surrounding environment including the air, water and materials with which children may come into contact as well as nearby land uses, roadways and other hazards (World Health Organization, 2002). According to Education Development Centre Inc., (2001) a school's physical environment includes the school building and the surrounding grounds, such as noise, temperature and lighting as well as physical, biological and chemical agents. It is a person's surroundings and objects therein, the sum total of things and conditions in the neighbourhood. It is the place in which an individual's behaviour and growth occurs (Garrison, Kingston and McDonald, 1984).

Making their own contributions to the catalogue of definitions on environment, behavioural scientists – Schaimbery and Smith, (1982) stated that environment is made up of human beings, their various levels of interaction and the physical environment which includes equipment, materials, various aids for learning as well as buildings that house many of these objects and persons. The school environment this paper is examining falls within the above definitions. The school environment also entails psychosocial climate and culture: that is, school polices that support, reinforce and sustain social relationships, attitudes, feelings, values, health and emotional well being of the children and staff. Physical and psychological safety, positive interpersonal relationships, recognition of the needs and success of the individual and support for learning are all part of the psychosocial environment (Education Development Centre Inc., 2001).

Teaching involves those activities through which learning takes place. Ogwo (1996), said that it is a process of assisting learners to acquire knowledge. It is not only knowledge that can be acquired through teaching. Skill and attitude can also be acquired through teaching. In his own view, Ekpenyong (1990), stated that teaching consisted of a system of activities, which takes place under specific conditions and is directed to learners. Teaching as a process connotes series of activities on the part of the teacher as well as the learners.

Learning is a change in human disposition or capability, which persists over a period of time, and which is not simply ascribable to processes of growth (Gagne, 1977). He further asserted that the kind of change called “learning” exhibits itself as a change in behaviour and the inference of learning is made by comparing what behaviour was possible before the individual was placed in a “learning situation” and what behaviour can be exhibited after such treatment. The change may be and often is, an increased capability for some type of performance. It may also be an altered disposition of the sort called “attitude” or “interest” or “value”. The change must have more than momentary performance, it must be capable of being retained over some period of time. Finally, it must be distinguished from the kind of change that is attributable to growth, such as a change in height or the development of muscles through exercise.

Learning occurs when the stimulus situation together with the contents of memory affect the learner in such a way that his performance changes from a time before being in that situation to a time after being in it. The change in performance is what leads to the conclusion that learning has occurred (Gagne, 1977).

PRIMARY EDUCATION

Primary education is that which occupies the elementary or basic level in the education pyramid. It is the systematic training acquired during childhood’s developmental stage. It is the level where foundation is laid for secondary education. Primary education takes care of children from ages six to eleven (6-11 years) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This level of education is very crucial and critical, and with that being the case, it becomes imperative that a healthy school environment be put in place to ensure the safety of the children and facilitate effective teaching and learning. The children of today are the adults of tomorrow. They deserve to inherit a safer and healthier world. There is no task more important than safeguarding their environment. Most children throughout the world attend primary school. A healthy school environment can directly improve their health and effective learning and thereby contribute to the development of healthy adults as skilled and productive members of society.

In supporting the above assertion, Odiase, (1989) drawing upon the work of Frederick Froeble stated that childhood is the most important stage of the total development of man and humanity. Many modern scholars have supported and expressed the positive relationship between good early childhood education and future performance in life. He further advocated that educators should take interest in the early childhood education and provide suitable environment necessary for the child’s physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual growth. This rests on the premise that a formidable substratum is a necessary condition for a desirable superstructure in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FACILITATES TEACHING AND LEARNING

Learning can occur in both formal and informal settings. The school is the formal setting where learning takes place. The school environment can be viewed from both physical and psychosocial perspectives. The school environment from the physical perspective relates to the physical elements in the environment

while the psychosocial environment of the school entails the social relationships, interactions, attitudes and culture that exist among pupils, school personnel and the surrounding communities.

It is not sufficient for a school to keep a clean and well-maintained physical environment, additionally, it must strive to maintain a positive psychosocial climate and culture. It is the combination of a good physical and a positive psychosocial environment that constitutes a healthy school environment which facilitates effective teaching and learning. According to the American Academy of Paediatrics (1993) "a healthy school environment is one that protects students and staff against immediate injury or disease and promotes prevention activities and attitudes against known risk factors that might lead to future disease or disability". World Health Organization (2002) defines a healthy school environment as one that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working.

EFFECTS OF AN UNHEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The environment is one of the primary determinants of children's health: Drinking of contaminated water can result in diarrhoea disease, air pollution can worsen acute respiratory infections and trigger asthma attacks (World Health Organization, 2002). A sick child may have to stay away from the classroom and be kept in the sickbay while lessons are going on. In some severe cases, the child may have to stay away from school completely for days depending on the degree of the illness, to enable him or her receive medical attention.

Children are more susceptible to the adverse health effect of chemicals, physical and biological hazards than adults. The effects on them are reduced immunity and other risks. Children have been found to be more vulnerable to the toxic effects of environmental hazards than adults because of their tender nature. Children breathe more air, consume more food and drink more water than adults. The exposure of school children to any contaminant in air, water or food would affect their health and also learning ability.. Children spend much of their day within school environment during critical developmental stages. It is important to the health of these children that they have clean water to drink, enough water to use for hygiene, adequate sanitation facilities, clean air to breathe, safe and nutritious food and a safe place to learn and play. A contaminated environment can cause or exacerbate health problems (World Health Organization, (2002)

Several studies opined that Intelligent Quotient (IQ) scores can dramatically increase when young children are placed in enriched and safe environment. Equally, Schaimbery and Smith (1982) have stressed the importance of environment of the young child. A healthy and supportive environment should be the right of every child and the responsibility of individuals who work with and care for children, be it in the family, community and educational institution. World Health Organisation (2002) estimated that nearly 5,500 children die each day from bacteria in food. Unsafe food remains a wide-spread public health problem in all parts of the world. Surveys in New Zealand, Europe and North America indicated that each year up to 10 % of the population suffer from diseases caused by unsafe food. In developing countries, a polluted environment, lack of a safe water supply and poor sanitation increase the likelihood of food contamination (WHO, 2002)

Children's behavioural patterns are distinctively different from adults and place them at risk from exposure to environmental threats that adults may not face. These behaviours include placing fingers and other objects in the mouth and not washing hands before eating. Children lack the experience to judge risks associated with their behaviours: They are more likely to take risks, such as climbing, running and jumping from unsafe structures. Play is in their character. Odiase, (1989) drawing upon the work of Frederick Froebel, observed that "play" is paramount and is the characteristic activity of children, while "work" is that of boyhood.

CREATING A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Henry, (2000) in Rachel, Jana and Katrina, (2009) affirmed that school environment should be safe havens for teaching and learning, free of unsafe structures, materials and contaminated items that can injure and harm the children. It should be free from crime and violence, Any instance of crime or violence at school not only affects the individual involved but also may disrupt the educational process and affect bystanders, the school staff itself and the surrounding community.

According to World Health Organization, components of a healthy school environment should entail:

Table I: Components of a healthy environment.

Provision of basic necessities	shelter, warmth, water, food, light, ventilation, sanitary facilities, emergency medical care
Protection from biological threats	Molds, unsafe or insufficient water, unsafe food, vector-borne diseases, venomous animals, rodents and hazardous insects and other animals (e.g. dogs)
Protection from physical threats	Traffic and transport. Violence and crime. Injuries, extreme heat and cold and radiation
Protection from chemical threats	Air pollution, water pollution, pesticides, hazardous waste. materials and finishes, asbestos, paints, cleaning agents

Source – World Health Organisation (2002)

A school environment that entails the above listed characteristics is bound to create a safe, comfortable and conducive setting that will enhance and facilitate teaching and learning. Learning involves selection, arrangement and delivery of information. Learners need an appropriate environment to interact with information presented to them. To further justify this fact Dececco & Crawford, (1988) asserted that theories of learning describe and explain the conditions under which learning does and does not occur. A theory of learning is a general concept which applies to all organisms, to all learning tasks and to all situations where learning occurs. It considers the conditions which give rise to learning as the “cause” and the learning itself as the “effect”. It explains, predicts and controls the way in which environmental conditions affect the learning of the organism.

Going by WHO’s standard of what an ideal school environment should entail, African countries and particularly Nigeria, still have a long way to go. This assertion is so because most places we regard as school environment are not qualified in the least to be so addressed. The reason being that basic facilities that constitute the components of a healthy school environment are absent, therefore, proper teaching and learning cannot take place. Little wonder, our educational standards are nothing to write home about. African nations must wake up to address these poor conditions in our school environment and educational systems, in order to save our on-coming generations from being a misfit in the new global environment that science and technology has brought us into. The physical environment in the classroom also has a profound effect on individual children, the group as a whole and the teacher. The physical environment includes the size of the room, the colours of the walls, the type of flooring, the amount of light and the number of windows. While the teacher may have limited control over many of these features, yet he/ she has options about how to organize furniture, what materials to put out and what to bring outdoors to make the total space available to him or her more interesting..

A physical setting that is safe, attractive, comfortable and well designed helps children engage in the activities they are offered. Such an environment can support the goals for the children and free the teacher to observe and interact with them in positive ways. It is important that the learning environment meet children’s developmental needs, it makes all children including those with special needs feel safe and comfortable and that they belong. As a result, they are helped to become independent and confident learners.

CULTURAL HARMONY

Schools are normally located or sited in a community which has its own cultural beliefs and ways of life which are in most times enforced and made binding on every one in that community. If the practices and activities of the schools in such a community are at variance with the cultural beliefs and practices of the host community, these would pose a great threat and danger to the school environment as teachers and students would have to teach and learn within the rules and regulations of such a community regardless of the policies of the school, otherwise there would be frictions and chaos. This would definitely undermine teaching and learning. Culture has a significant role to play in the onerous task of achieving a healthy school environment that can facilitate effective teaching and learning. The school must therefore examine its activities and align them with that of the community in order to achieve an harmonious cultural relationship that would guarantee peace and co-operation in the school and between the school and the host community where the school is sited.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Creating and sustaining an healthy school environment is about having a peaceful environment where teaching and learning can effectively be conducted and undertaken. Any volatile issue that can engender enmity and unhealthy school environment which can undermine teaching and learning must be seriously addressed and tackled squarely. The northern part of Nigeria is porous and notorious for religious uprisings and still prone to religious upheavals. The school environment in such a crisis-prone area cannot be healthy for effective teaching and learning. Teachers would be apprehensive and conduct teaching under fear, such teaching cannot be thorough. Also, children would not be able to learn effectively as they too, would be doing so under fear and possible religion-induced crisis. Achieving a health school environment demands religious tolerance among the people in the school environment and the host community where the school is located.

SECURITY MEASURES

One of the components of a healthy school environment as stated by the World Health Organisation is protection from physical threats. A school environment that is healthy needs to be protected from all forms of threats, such as threat to lives of the teachers and students and threat to school's properties and the properties of the individuals in the school environment (staff, pupils and visitors). Threats and physical attack can cause psychological damage to the\ spirits, souls and bodies of the teachers and students. If this arises, teaching and learning would be undermined and rendered ineffective. Creating and sustaining a healthy school environment where teaching and learning would be done effectively requires putting in place appropriate security measures that would prevent the commission of crime and other forms of physical and psychological assault on the teachers and students.

SUSTAINING A HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

A healthy school environment can be created, reinforced and sustained. .To achieve this requires the involvement, support and commitment of virtually everyone in the school – pupils, administrators, teachers, custodians and maintenance staff, school counselors, school nurses, nutrition service workers. In addition, schools need involvement of families and environmental workers, public health, public safety, public welfare, and other community agencies, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Ministry of Education (local, state and federal) and Government (Education Development Center, 2001).

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

School administrators have the overall responsibility for creating and sustaining a healthy school environment (physical and psychosocial climate).

Below, are some steps school administrators can adopt to ensure a safe school environment that will influence effective teaching and learning.

- Provide leadership and administrative support for creating and supporting a healthy school environment.
- Establish a set of measurable goals and objectives and design activities around improving the school's physical and social environment.
- Develop, implement and enforce policies and a plan for creating and sustaining a healthy school environment that clearly defines acceptable and unacceptable school conditions.
- Create a school environmental health and safety team or club, that includes pupils, teachers, school officers, Parent Teachers Association (PTA) members and community leaders.
- Conduct a site assessment of the school's physical and social environment to determine the school's needs.
- Help teachers develop activities for pupils that emphasize the importance of an overall healthy school environment and maintenance culture.
- Empower pupils by involving them in planning, creating and sustaining a school
- culture of safety and respect.

- Involve the parents and community about any school construction or renovation plans and or policies regarding school safety.
- Evaluate healthy school activities periodically to assess progress towards achieving your goals and objectives and use results to revise, improve and strengthen your programmes
- Regularly observing any potential threat to the health of the environment and immediately taking steps to nib such potential threat in the bud

CONCLUSION

The state of the school environment remains a factor in achieving an effective teaching and learning. A conducive school environment would impact positively on teaching and learning while an environment that is not conducive would have negative effect on teaching and learning. Achieving a healthy school environment where teaching and learning can effectively take place is realistic if all stakeholders work towards that direction. To this end, adequate attention has to be given to create, reinforce and sustain not only a healthy physical school environment, but also a conducive psychosocial climate, since both constitute a healthy school environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations of this Paper:

School authorities should take steps to comply with all the guidelines of local, national and international agencies for the creation and sustenance of a healthy school environment.

All the necessary measures that would ensure an healthy school environment must be put in place. In addition, the school authorities must be vigilant to discover any possible threat to the environment and take urgent steps to nib such threat in the bud before it creates a problem for the environment,

Every body in the school environment must eschew any harmful practice that can be injurious to the environment, lives of people and properties in the environment. Achieving an healthy school environment is a collective responsibility, therefore, all stakeholders must co-operate and play their role effectively to achieve an healthy environment.

School administrators should enact policies geared towards promoting safe, attractive and comfortable school environment that will facilitate effective teaching and learning.

The school authority should liaise with Parents Teachers Association, community leaders, public agencies, NGOs and ministry officials to organize seminars, short talks and short plays that will help to sensitize the school community (pupils and members of staff) and arouse their interest in personal hygiene and maintenance culture.

Governments of African countries and particularly Nigeria, should realize that good education is the right of every child, therefore, they should endeavour to address the deplorable conditions in our primary (elementary) schools, by providing basic facilities that would stimulate effective teaching and learning.

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