

SAFETY IN CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE COVID-19 ERA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Safety is a powerful tool for sustainable development, therefore educating for sustainability should begin early in life. This paper focuses on safety in childhood education towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals in the Covid-19 Era. It is the right of every child to be safe while in schools, and be educated for sustainable development and the early years is the period that children have the greatest ability to learn. Meaningful teaching and learning cannot take place in an environment devoid of safety for both learners and staff. It's a fact that if there is no safety, there would be no sustainable environment. The paper also expounds the explanation of development goals and sustainability of same and its link with the Covid-19 pandemic. It suggests a way forward early childhood education as well as concludes and recommends among others that government should increase the investment in early childhood safety in order to expand access to quality early childhood education, thereby building a sustainable society and give the opportunity to develop a strong foundation for achieving safety and wellbeing.

Keywords: Safety, childhood education, Covid-19, sustainable development goals.

Introduction

The World Health Organization on 11 March, 2020 announced the COVID-19 pandemic but before now, the world was already facing learning crises in which meeting UN's Sustainable Development 2030 goals was not feasible. The advent of the coronavirus in our lives has evidenced and intensified the weaknesses of our system in its dimensions: economic, political, social, family and educational. In the educational context, COVID-19 represents a threat to the advancement of education worldwide impacting the global closure of schools at all levels, second, the economic recession generated by the control measures of the pandemic. Among all those affected, children are likely to be the most vulnerable and at risk.

It is feared that the impact of COVID-19 in education could waste great human potential and reverse decades of progress. Against this backdrop, the UN Secretary-General said "As the world faces unsustainable levels of inequality, we need education – the great equalizer more than ever. The importance of education to human development cannot be underestimated because Education is a means of self-development through learning, knowledge, skills and habits conveyed across generations. It is of great concern that education at all levels has been threatened since the emergence of the coronavirus disease, 2019 (COVID-19). The coronavirus

is a highly infectious disease that has plagued the world population over the months from December 2019 till date.

The disease spread through droplets (World Health Organization, 2020) and has affected more than 9.1 million persons and resulted in about 473,000 deaths worldwide. Countries have relied on several containment measures including a range of physical and social distancing measures to flatten the epidemiological curve and avert morbidity and mortality due to COVID-19 (Barasa et al, 2020; Viner et al, 2020). Other measures engaged are physical distancing, such as complete closure of the economy, including educational institutions (Nicola et al, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The time to lay a strong foundation in a child's life are the early years of development. It is in this early childhood period that children develop their basic values, attitudes, skills, behaviors and habits which maybe long lasting. It is important that children in their early years should be protected from unsafe conditions that would enhance their overall development in life. Exposure of children to unsafe conditions and experiences during the early years negatively impact all aspects of children's lives.

Safety and security are basic elements of childhood education though are often neglected. Safety should be a top priority before a child begins school. Clean environment help prevent the spread of illnesses which is common in an early childhood setting. Safety extends into nearly all aspects of a childcare and its day to day operations. Safety should be on the mind of all teachers at all times, creating a safe environment will prevent unnecessary mishaps. Unfortunately, children getting hurt in the classroom is a very common thing.

Routines are also an essential part of building a safe class. While these routines provide other important functions such as teaching children about responsibility and self-discipline, they also help with establishing rules and guidelines. When teachers enforce routines, children find them easier to follow and accidents are less likely to occur. Examples of routines in this COVID-19 era include: regular washing of hands, using of face mask, social distancing etc. Prevention is often the best form of safety, so taking the time to plan a hazard free classroom can go a long way toward minimizing the chances of child injuries or death.

Childhood Education

Education is the key to the development of man and his society. Mbachu (2009) opine that education has always been seen as an instrument that prepares people for life in the society. Obanya (2008) views education as a lifelong process enabling people to learn in society, to be able to live in it. Today's children are the adults of and leaders of tomorrow therefore, it's necessary that they should be well taken care of in their all-round development especially concerning their safety.

Early childhood Education (ECE) or Childhood Education is simply early education whose purpose is to prepare children for elementary school which would eventually form the basis of their lifelong journey into a brighter future. It can be referred to as a pre-school, day care, nursery school. The National Policy on Education (2004) refers to the first stage 3-5 years as early childhood. Edem and Okon (2005) state that it is the foundation upon which the structure of a sound educational system is based. It is also the level of education that is very important because it ultimately serves as the foundation on which other levels are built upon.

Childhood Education is an integral part of the Universal Basic Education (UBE). It covers the aspect of infancy 0-5 years which is the nursery or early childhood and care sections.

Education at this level is very important because whatever experiences a child has at this stage has a profound impact on the adult life. The aims of Early Childhood Education include fostering proper development of children, identifying and addressing their problem, harnessing their potentials, molding their characters, enhancing their learning and equipping them for life so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal communal and global development (Mahula, 2007).

Concept Of Childhood Safety

Safety can be defined as the state of being free from harm or danger. Safety is a concept that includes all measures and practices taken to prevent the life, health and body, integrity of individuals (Safeopedia, 2019). A safe and secure learning environment can be termed as protection of children from physical harm, perceived as an adult responsibility to provide a safe physical environment for children's learning (Saltmarsh, Khopper & Barr, 2009). It's therefore of importance that schools should be places where children are protected from any form of danger, diseases, physical harm or injury. Schools should have safe measures in place such as video cameras in class, security, surveillance, age appropriate outdoor playgrounds to avoid causing any harm to the health and development of children. Exposures to hazards such as infectious diseases as a result of unsafe water supply, lack of hand-washing facilities or unsanitary latrines may lead to infections in children (FRESH, 2013).

Covid-19 And Its Impact On Children

CONVID-19 was first discovered in December, 2019 in Wuhan City (China) and has become a global challenge to health. A lockdown in Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province failed to contain the outbreak, and it spread to other parts of mainland China and around the world. The COVID-19 is the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2). In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Its symptoms include: fever, cough, tiredness. Children have similar symptoms to adults and generally have mild illness.

There are three channels through which children's lives have been affected. The first channel is through infection with the virus. Incidentally, children have to a large extent been spared from the severe symptomatic reactions more common among older people. Its adverse effect has been common for children to tragically lose a parent, family member or caregiver to COVID-19.

The second channel is through the socio-economic effects of the virus and related measures to transmission and the control. As health services become overwhelmed in caring for large members of infected patients requiring treatment, children and pregnant women are less able to access standard care making them adapt to alternative childcare arrangements. Physical distancing and lockdown measures, restrictions of movement and border closures and surveillance strategies are all affecting children's mental health. Children today face anxiety about the negative impact of the pandemic on their lives and their communities and uncertainty regarding the future. The pandemic is having profound effects on children's mental wellbeing, their social development, their safety, their privacy, their economic security and beyond. The third channel is the risk that the virus and its response poses to the longer-term effects to achieve the sustainable Development Goals and ensure the realization of the rights of all children.

Safety Tips for Children in the Classroom During the Covid-19 Era

Keeping children safe in classrooms are very important so as to balance their educational, social and emotional needs in the mist of the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. There are steps that schools can take to reduce the risk of COVID-19.

- ✓ **Wear a mask:** The WHO recommends wearing face mask in indoor public spaces and outdoors where there is a high of COVID-19 transmission and schools are no exception. Wearing of face mask should be a priority as therefore it's advised that the child should be provided with multiple cloth face masks. Children who are less than two years and also children with any breathing problems should not use a face mask.
- ✓ **Keep hands cleans:** Children should be taught regular hand-washing routines. They should also be taught the importance of hand washing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially before and after eating, coughing/sneezing or adjusting a face mask. In situations where hand-washing isn't available, children should be taught to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Also explain to children that they should avoid touching his or her eyes, nose and mouth. Schools should encourage routines that encourage regular hand washing and how to follow good hand hygiene practices.
- ✓ **Social distancing:** Social distancing is another effective measure to use to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Within the school context it means reducing contact between groups of children and maintaining a safe distance of 1-2 meters between pupils and staff. Different countries have a specific maximum number of children allowed in the classroom at a given time. E.g. eliminating lockers or grouping them by pupil groups, creating one way traffic in school hallways. Ensuring a minimum safety distance between pupils and staff will depend on classroom size, room availability, and the number of pupils in a class.
- ✓ **Clean and disinfect:** Wherever children are, schools or home cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces can help reduce the risk of illness.
- ✓ **Get vaccinations:** Children should be up to date will all recommended vaccines. School aged children should get a flu shot each season. Getting a flu vaccine is especially important presently because the flu and COVID-19 cause similar common signs and symptoms, the flu shot can reduce the risk of the flu and its complications.

Concept Of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The sustainable Development of Goals (SDG) are the goals that take off from Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on the 25th of September, 2015, therefore, the general assembly of the United Nation adopted the 17 sustainable development goals (SDG) and 169 targets at the United Nation headquarters in New York. A widely accepted definition of sustainable development comes from "our common future", the 1987 landmark report of the Brundtland Commission. This states "sustainable development is development that meets the needs' of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Despite some perceptions that associate sustainable development mainly with the natural environment, it focuses on ways of meeting people's social and economic needs within natural resource limits-so that human development can be both sustainable and sustained.

Adebayo (2010) opine that the concept of sustainable development is the effort at improving the quality of human life in such a way that the needs of the future generation are not jeopardized. Sustainable development promotes well-being and longevity of human beings

thereby ensuring that people fulfil their potential in dignity, equality and a healthy environment. Sustainable Development involves fulfilling our collective responsibilities to ensure a safer, cleaner, healthier and more inclusive world for both today's children and for their children. Sustainable Development Goals consist of three dimensions according to Worship Manual. These dimensions integrate all the seventeen SGDs i.e. social, economic and environment. The UN Resolution on the outcomes of Rio 20, the future we want states, "we will also consider the need for promoting intergenerational solidarity for the achievement of sustainable development, taking into account the needs of future generations".

Early Childhood Education (ECE) And Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS)

Children's safety, learning and behavior during the early years have a great impact not only for school success, but also for their capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is greatly recognized in the sustainable development goal as part of the target area. Education at the early childhood aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. Early childhood care education had the possibility to nurture caring, capable and responsible future citizens (UNESCO, 2017).

The child's brain is sharpened by the early life experiences and the environment in which young children live and this invariably helps them become healthy and productive members of the society. Nigeria with her unique ethnicities and difference in diversities still live side by side, learning to respect and appreciate early through the impact of parents, community members and early education would help children acquire on identity grounded in culture close to them. In order to realize this, early childhood education is necessary to incorporate in early childhood programme.

The child's first educators are the members of the family; they have the greatest responsibility in shaping young children's attitudes, values, behaviours, habits which are accepted in a society. So they have an important role to play in educating their children for sustainable development. Children can emerge as important change agents to push and influence sustainable development when education for sustainable development is effectively undertaken by parents, siblings and other extended family members.

Situations where formal education programmes are not available, non-formal education can set up as an integral component of community programme or otherwise to provide parents and grandparents with opportunities to discuss what could be done differently in daily life in order to become an effective agent of bringing about sustainable development. To ensure the full potential of children in life with sustainable development, there's a need to express a vision for early childhood education along with other essential measures so that could contribute to 2030 world agenda.

In Nigeria early childhood care education should be considered as a fundamental right to ensure quality nutrition, healthcare and educational provision for all children. The best investment of Nigeria would be to promote human resources development, gender equality and social cohesion and to reduce the cost for later remedial programme is early childhood care education why include children in Sustainable Development. Children should not be overlooked in social statistics or social progress plan because they apparently make up a large and relatively dependent part of the population. Children are the basis for all dimensions of sustainable development, therefore they have a right to thrive, develop to their full potential

and live in a sustainable world. Children should be encouraged to maximize their potential since they would be the social, political and economic decision makers of the future.

One good reason why children are focused in SDG is that supporting progress for children is one promising way to meeting the long term of the SDG agenda. Investing in children will reinforce progress over time and equitable approach to children's material, wellbeing, health and education today to check adult inequalities in the future. Children will spearhead the changes in social norms and awareness that are key to attaining the goals on gender equality, peaceful societies and environmental sustainability.

The Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, Transforming our world; the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was unambiguous about the need for investing in all children and for those children to be provided safe and nurturing environment required for them to achieve their full potential, to be heard and participate in change and can be supported in their roles as crucial agents in the transformation of societies and sustainable social and economic progress. Children's needs and rights are thus interdependent with sustainable development. To achieve the greatest impact on the lives of children, the (SDGs) should include goals targets that purpose-fully consider children's rights and needs within each of the dimensions of economic development, social development and environmental sustainability.

Societies can only develop in a sustainable manner if the basic needs and rights of children particularly the poorest and most vulnerable are met. Evidence shows that investing in children yields high and long-lasting returns, only for individuals and families but for entire societies and for the generation to come. Public investments at an early stage of human development are justified based on purely economic and social grounds due to expected wider benefits to individuals and society at large. In the context of developed countries, investments in children are often seen as the most cost-effective way to break the circle of disadvantage and promote social mobility (European Commission, 2013) or as a vehicle for strong and inclusive growth (OECD, 2016).

Covid-19 Pandemic and Impact on Sustainable National Development

Covid-19 Pandemic has greatly caused an unprecedented crises in all areas. Particularly in the field of education, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the disease and mitigate its impact. The pandemic has shown that the crises is fueled by poverty, hunger, weak health systems and lack of clean water and sanitation. The global recession caused by the COVID-19 response is a learning and has made researchers question whether the sustainable development goals (SDGs) are fit for the post-pandemic age. Some have even claimed that certain SDG targets might be counter-productive because they enhance growth rather than development. While the SDGs do not have a dedicated pandemic response plan, we believe it is essential not to delink the response to the pandemic from SDGs-The Covid-19 crisis demonstrates the need to integrate the SDGs at the national level as well as in individual health-care decisions.

Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development emphasizes that achieving the SDGs requires balancing three dimensions of sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. Moreover, sustainable development requires us to balance our needs with the ability of future generations to meet

their own needs. The Covid-19 pandemic shows that sustainable development goes beyond national strategies.

How Does Covid-19 Affect the Sustainable Segments Of Society Development

1. Loss of income, leading vulnerable segments of society and families to fall below poverty line
2. Food production and distribution could be disrupted
3. Devastating effect on health outcomes
4. Women's economic gains at risk and increased levels of violence against women.
5. School for many closed; remote learning less effective and not accessible for some.
6. Supply disruptions and adequate access to clean water hinder access to clean hand washing facilities.

Conclusion

Children are at the center of the Sustainable Development Goals. Ensuring safe, healthy and well-educated children are the foundations of a thriving and equitable society within each of the dimensions of economic development, social development and environmental sustainability. Safety should be a top priority before a child begins school. Safety extends into nearly all aspects of a child care and its day to day operations. Keeping children safe is the most secure tool for curbing Covid-19 and achieving the Sustainable National Development Goals.

Recommendations

1. Government should increase and expand funds allocated for quality childhood education safety. Sustainable societies cannot be built if children are not given the opportunities to develop a strong foundation for development wellbeing and life-long learning.
2. Workshops and seminars should be organized for teachers in order to be equipped for effective teaching and learning about safety in childhood education.
3. Educational planners should review early child care education curriculum to suit aim of sustainable development goals that can help toward achieving sustainable development in the country.
4. Integrating child protection messaging in Covid-19 risk communication & community engagement training frontline health professionals in psychological first aid and detection and referral of child protection risk.
5. Ensuring that education and child protection sectors are enabled for proactively work together to put child-friendly, effective protection response mechanism in place that can function through school structures.

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