

17

Early Childhood Education: An Approach to Sustainability of Sports and Christian Values

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ABSTRACT

The early years of a child's life are crucial and highly significant to the overall development of the child. However, physical activity is a significant component in Early Childhood Education. Most Early Childhood Education programmes revolve round physical activities. Physical activities promote physical development and social skills of children; it is also important in the mental and cognitive development of children. Directly related to social skills development in children are Christian values which are the core values taught to Christians in the Bible. These values shape Christians into the type of people that God wants them to be. The values are also taught in schools and children are encouraged to put what they have learnt into practice. Subsequently, Sports can be used as a platform for teaching these values at Early Childhood Education in Christian schools and care centres, using the position that views the Creator God as the source of truth, beauty, wisdom and life. The belief of Christian educators that God made humans in His image can be used as a basis in helping children imbibe His nature which includes these characteristics- creativity, morality, a capacity for spirituality, met cognition, and self-actualization. Religious practices such as prayers, devotions before games and thanksgiving after winning can be used to help coaches and athletes deal with stressful situations in professional, collegiate, interscholastic and youth sports. Lastly, the teaching of Christian values at tender age using sport will help to curb lots of societal ills the world is battling with presently.

Keywords: *Christian-values, early-childhood, education, sports, religion*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education over the years has been greatly influenced by the thoughts and ideologies of great philosophers and educators. The development of any nation largely depends on the educational accomplishment of the populace. Proper and good education facilitates and quality learning all through life among people of any age group. Children all over the world, irrespective of tribe, colour, sex, religion and nationality, possess inborn qualities. The brain of a child is connected in such a way that a child starts learning and responding to stimulus right from the womb. Right inside the womb, the child responds to light, sound and even touch. As such, Early Childhood Education is a very important aspect in the realization of a child's educational goals and achievement in life, especially in accomplishing success in future educational endeavours from the primary even to tertiary.

The importance of early childhood education was emphasized in the 2019 UNICEF report titled "A World Ready to Learn" in which quality early childhood education was reported to generate a positive sequence of learning, while lack of access to pre-primary education was believed to widen achievement gaps and restricts opportunities. The report further stressed those children who are not able to meet up at a young age often "never catch up with their peers", consequently, bringing about high dropout rates. The 2030 Sustainable goals agenda also stressed the significance of early childhood education when it stated in target 4.2 that "all girls and boys are entitled to have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (Abidogun, et al 2020).

WHAT IS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Early childhood education (ECE) is a term that refers to the period of time from a child's birth to when they enter kindergarten. It is more than preparation for primary school, as it aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. ECE has the possibility to nurture caring, capa-

ble and responsible future citizens (UNESCO, 2022). Oduolowu, (2006) describes it as a unique branch of knowledge which includes the essential components of all family and programme arrangements for young children from birth to the statutory school age of six". While Abidogun, Ola-Alani, and Viavonu, (2020) sees it as "specifically designed education programme for young children before the age of formal schooling between zero to five plus."

Early Childhood education was captured in the National Policy on Education (NPE 2014) as "the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school". ECE consists of activities and/or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children prior to their entry into elementary school. ECE programs include any type of educational program that serves children in the preschool years and is designed to improve later school performance. Thus, it can be described as a formal system of training that attempts to expose children to purposeful and specially designed experiences towards attaining learning and acquisition of knowledge which aids the child's development right from birth to the statutory school age of six.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Historically early childhood education can be traced to works of great philosophers like Martin Luther, John Amos Comenius and John Locke among others. According to Martin Luther (1483-1546), children should be educated to read independently in order to be able to read the Bible. The ideology of Martin Luther contributed immensely to the birth of Early Childhood Education. He believed that educating a child would be of great benefit to the society in the same way the Bible in Proverbs 22:6 says "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it". Also, John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) built on Martin Luther's ideology. According to him, he believed that educating a child at an early age goes in line with fulfilling human's godlike nature. He believed that learning should be by doing, through play amongst others.

In addition, John Locke (1632-1704), who is considered as father of modern education philosophy, believes that the child's mind at birth is free and it is the society and environment that fills it up with experiences and knowledge. According to him, the environment determines the development and ultimately who the child will become. This means that it's the quality of the environment that will determine the quality of children's learning and development. (Baldwin, 1913). The implication of Locke's philosophy in Early Childhood education, stresses the fact that the mind of the child should be disciplined, the teacher should be tender and gentle to the children and should strive to keep the attention of the pupils, hence the need for pleasant environment. He also emphasized sensory approach to learning and the knowledge of the Bible should be taken seriously for beginners (Abidogun, et al 2020)

Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel, one of the founding fathers of early childhood education and whose educational philosophy was based on idealism, believed that formal curriculum and methodology are necessary for teaching children. Training programs should be designed for teachers to enable them observe children and develop activities based on readiness. He believed strongly that children develop through play. In this regard, the play can be through physical activities (sports) or even role playing, storytelling which is one of the tools used in Christianity to pass a message across; even Jesus Christ taught the people using parables when delivering the sermon on the mount. Froebel believes that when children are given proper guidance and direction, they will flourish and develop according to their own nature. Froebel believed so much in play and as a result developed series of objects for children to explore under the guidance of the teacher (Brehony 2001). Consequently, one of his significant contributions to early childhood education was looking at play as a means whereby children externalized their inner nature.

He contributed to the idea that formal curriculum, methodology and teacher training practices are necessary to support children's learning. He established the idea that ECE is a formal process that occurs within organized settings and he was the first person to develop the first kindergarten. (Brehony, 2001)

Approaches to pedagogy and implications for practice

Approaches	Implications for practice
Montessori's Approach (Arthur et al., 2018)	1. Combining intentional instruction, and careful observation with play based curriculum that is based on children's interest and capabilities.

Approaches	Implications for practice
Reggio Emilia's Approach (Giamminuti, 2013}	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The environment acts as the third teacher. 2. Designing aesthetically stimulating environments, with predominantly open-ended materials that help create a sense of community. 3. Deep exploration of a co-constructed topic of interest. using the 100 languages of children 4. Documentation using pedagogy of listening strategies enables all participants' voices to be made visible to children, educators and families.
Project Approach (Arthur et al., 2018)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use sustained shared thinking to scaffold thinking skills with groups and individuals. 2. In depth emergent exploration of a topic of interests
Developmentally Appropriate Practice & Anti-Bias Curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual, age, and cultural appropriateness of experiences. 2. Scaffold cultural competence and respect for diversity. Recognize and challenge bias.
High Scope Approach (Elkind, 2014)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Value of the plan-do-review strategy in scaffolding children's metacognition and dispositions to learn. 2. Age appropriate behaviour guidance strategy.
Project Zero	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plan a variety of learning experiences across a broad range of intelligences. 2. Foster dispositions to learn and critical thinking skills.
Anji Play	Open ended indoor and outdoor environments with a predominance of loose parts and a focus on design and architecture.
Godly Play (Stonehouse & May, 2010)	Set aside a special place to be with God. Make available props for the child to re-tell Bible stories through play and wondering.
Nature Play (Warden, 2012)	Unstructured play in nature fosters creativity, resilience, life-long attitudes of stewardship.

(Berk, 2019; Gullo & Graue, 2020; Ludlow, 2014)

The approaches above give clear philosophical principles and approaches to practice that Christian Early Childhood Education and care (ECEC) services can put into action. It is the responsibility of all Christian ECEC educators to have a deep personal understanding of the Christian worldview and to use it as a benchmark to consider the appropriateness of secular theories and approaches to Christian education contexts

IMPORTANCE OF SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES IN ECE

Physical activity is a significant component in Early Childhood Education. Most Early Childhood Education programmes revolve round physical activities. According to Kracht, Webster and Staiano (2020) "Physical activity is paramount for appropriate growth and development of young children" In a research conducted in Canada it was observed that despite the benefits "one-third of preschool age children (3-5 years of age) did not meet the physical activity guidelines including 3 hours of physical activity daily, of which 1 hour is moderate- to-vigorous physical activity [MVPA]."

To further buttress the importance of physical activity, according to the executive summary of the WHO guidelines on physical activity, sleep and sedentary lifestyle 2019, "physical inactivity has been identified as a leading risk factor for global mortality and a contributor to the rise in overweight and obesity" This goes to show that children of this age group should engage in activities that involves a lot of movement, considering the fact that "early childhood is a period of rapid physical and cognitive development and a time during which a child's habits are formed and family lifestyle habits are open to changes and adaptations." (WHO, 2019)

According to Kracht, et al 2020, there is need to increase physical activity and decrease screen-

time in preschool age children in order to meet age appropriate guidelines and ensure healthy development. The Australian parenting websites in an article titled “physical activities for babies, why and how much” (2020) for children 0-8 years, it was stated that “physical activity is vital for young children’s health and development”. It further stressed that it involves “any activity that involves moving your body”. It was further stated that “children need different amounts of physical activity at different ages” and “it’s good for children to spend more time being active and less time sitting still”. In addition, it was maintained that physical activity is important for children’s health, wellbeing and development now and in the future”.

Some benefits of physical activities as highlighted in raisingchildren.net.au (2020) include:

- i. it strengthens children’s bones, muscles, hearts and lungs;
- ii. improves children’s coordination, balance, posture and flexibility;
- iii. helps children stay at a healthy weight;
- iv. reduces children’s risk of getting heart disease, cancer and type 2 diabetes later in life;
- v. boosts children’s wellbeing.

Furthermore, active children are more likely to “be confident and feel like they belong, be relaxed and sleep well, concentrate better at school, get along with others and make friends easily as well as share, take turns and cooperate”. It concluded that “physical activity is an important part of play and learning”. When children are engaged in physical activity with others, it’s a way for them to build relationships in family and community (raisingchildren.net.au, 2020).

Apart from physical activities helping in the development of physical development and social skills of children, it is also important in the mental and cognitive development of children. Amilia, 2018 highlighted 6 benefits of physical activities to the mental and cognitive development of children, among which are

- i. it boosts brainpower and cognitive development of the child;
- ii. it enhances academic learning;
- iii. it elevates mood and reduces anxiety;
- iv. improves social skills;
- v. enhances creativity and lastly;
- vi. helps maintain mental health and emotional well-being.

SPORTS VALUES

Education is evolving and the 21st century is witnessing a great turn around. The sustainable development goals which has qualitative education as its focal point recognizes the role of values and social skills in tackling global challenges which are hindrances to achieving these. Such global challenges include inactivity which leads to obesity in the lives of the young ones, unemployment and conflicts. Some sports values which are taught in schools can be used in achieving the sustainable development goals 4 and according to UNESCO include: fairness, teambuilding, equality, discipline, inclusion, perseverance and respect

According to UNESCO “sports have the power to provide a universal framework for learning values, thus contributing to the development of soft skills needed for responsible citizenship” To make this achievable, UNESCO has developed a lot of tools which showcase the benefits of sports values in different regions of the world. Such tools include an animated video available in English and also subtitled in French, a bilingual photo book available in English, French and Portuguese as well as an advocacy infographic available in Arabic, Chinese, French and Russian.

CHRISTIAN VALUES

Christian values can be regarded as the core values taught to Christians in the Bible. These values shape Christians into the type of people that God wants them to be. These values are taught in schools and children are encouraged to put what they have learnt into practice. Christian values which children should be taught in schools include: thankfulness, endurance, compassion, service, peace, hope, justice, wisdom and humility.

- **Thankfulness:** In Christianity, giving thanks is a value. The Bible stresses the importance of thanksgiving in so many of its passages e.g. Phil 4:6. The book of Psalms is filled with so many passages on giving thanks. Even Jesus Christ gave thanks for the five loaves of bread and two fishes before they were shared amongst the people. Children should be taught the importance of giving thanks for all the good things they have in their lives.
- **Endurance:** Children should be encouraged never to give up despite the situation and challenges of life. It teach-

es that in as much as children must be successful in life, there are times when they will need to struggle before achieving the desired success.

- **Compassion:** Children should be taught to love and show concern for others especially those who are going through one challenge or the other. It could be helping a friend who has an issue in the playground or one suffering from a kind of discomfort.
- **Peace:** Children should be taught how to live in peace amicably with others, how to get over arguments quickly and fairly. Children should be encouraged to be both peacemakers and peacekeepers. The Bible teaches that all must be at peace with every man. Also, in the sermon of Jesus on the mount, as recorded in Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God”
- **Justice:** Children are taught the importance of being fair to each other in play and at work. It helps in teaching against racism and discrimination. Children are told stories of Bible character who stood for justice. For example, the story of how King Solomon presided over the case of the two harlots. (1Kings 3:16)

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORTS AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

Historically, sports and religion have basic relationship. They both convey lessons and values to be taught and learned, using lots of symbols and actions as means of passing the message. A cursory look at history shows that many sports developed as part of religious festivals especially in the ancient Greek and Roman empires. Also, sport is often used as a metaphor for religious striving and sporting events evoke passionate commitment similar to that of religious festivals; religion and sports are symbolic systems that emphasize similar values and goals, including transcendence of limited personal desires in favor of non-material achievements or experiences and an emphasis on cooperation and personal sacrifice for the good of the group; both religion and sports convey their message by means of powerful symbols. (Womack, 2005).

Though there are differing views on the matter of sports and religion's involvement with each other, it should be apparent that sports and religion do have various common bonds. The association of sports and religion, “can be found in nearly every part of the sports world” (Lee, 2004). A religious scholar Charles Prebish (2010) claims that it is both necessary and expected to look at the newest revolution in sport- the growing relationship of religion and sport. The relationship can be seen through the “use” of sport by religion and the “use” of religion by sport (Coakley, 2011; Eitzen and Sage, 2003).

ACTIVITIES THAT CAN BE USED TO TEACH CHRISTIAN VALUES:

- **Use of songs and dance:** They could be taught a song like “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong; they are weak but He is strong. Yes Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus loves me for the Bible tells me so”. Singing will be accompanied by appropriate actions.
- **Use of play:** Children like acting and this is a way of attracting their attention and getting them involved in the lesson. For instance, the story of David and Goliath can be acted out to teach the children about faith in God as well as addressing the issue of bullying. Plays are unique ways of teaching Christian values to children. The story of the Good Samaritan can also be acted out to teach the value of kindness and compassion to the children. When children are given roles to act in any play, it makes them get involved in the story line; even when they grow up, they will always remember.
- **Across the finish line:** This is another game in which the teacher prepares questions on certain values that has been taught. The children are made to line up, teacher asks a child a question and if he/she gets it right, he or she can take a step towards the teacher. A wrong answer will involve taking a step backward. Whoever makes it to the finish line first becomes the winner.
- **Bible Verse Relay:** This can be performed both indoors and outdoors. It's a good way of teaching the Bible verses related to different Christian values. The children are divided into 2 teams, they are given different memory verse of relatively same length to memorize. At the sound of the whistle, a member of the team comes out and write a particular word from the Bible verse on either a white board or large cardboard paper in a relay style until it is complete. The team that gets the complete Bible verse become the winner and the team that writes it incorrectly will be made to write it all over again.

CONCLUSION

Eitzen and Sage (2003) opined that religion can be used to help coaches and athletes deal with stressful situations. For example, utilizing religious practices has been commonly implemented by coaches as a means of supplementing practical athletic techniques. Prayer activity has been found throughout professional sport, collegiate sport, interscholastic sport and even youth sport (Lee, 2004). Prayer is perhaps the most frequently employed use of religion by athletes. Examples of issues often requested for in

prayer may include protection, good performance and victory in competition. The uses of prayer have taken place in a variety of contexts as well. Some individuals see prayer as a means for being able to build unity and cohesion.

Others may see prayer as being more of a ritual. An example of such can be seen when some individuals recite the Lord's Prayer as a form of team ritual. Another example for prayer use is as a means for dealing with the uncertainties that are part of sports. Furthermore, some have used prayer as a vehicle for bringing forth God's intervention. In addition, the teaching of Christian values at tender age using sports will help to curb lots of societal ills the world is battling with presently. Consequently, in order to sustain Christian values, children should be exposed early, using activities which are interesting and stimulating and sports has been proven to be of significance in this respect. In other words, if we do not want Christian values to go into extinction, early exposure through the use of sports will help to achieve its sustainability.

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