

ADULT EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING FOR BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines the interconnectivity of adult education, lifelong learning, and early childhood development. It is aimed at establishing a relevant theoretical framework that underscores their interconnectivity. The paper examines how the active involvement of adults in educational pursuits can positively impact on the wholesome development of children in their early years by synthesizing key theories in adult education and early childhood development, such as Knowles' Andragogy and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theories, which aimed at examining the dynamic interplay between the role of adult education and how it will impact on the developmental environment of young children. The paper however made some recommendations among others that, government policies should provide more opportunities for parents and caregivers to take full advantage of adult education and lifelong learning programmes. Again, different mechanisms for continuous evaluation and meaningful family education programmes that will encourage feedback from the beneficiaries should be put in place. There should be continuous support and mentorship programmes available to parents and Caregivers as they engage in early childhood development. Opportunities for peer learning and professional guidance should be made available by early childhood Care Professionals.

Keywords: Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Early Childhood Development.

Introduction:

Early childhood development (ECD) prepares the framework and strong foundation for lifelong learning, health, and well-being. Researches have consistently underscored the critical importance of the early years in shaping a child's future. However, ensuring optimal development during this period requires more than just the parental care; it necessitates a comprehensive approach that includes adult education and lifelong learning. (Wasili & Hindman 2011; Fowowe, 2019). The role of adult education and lifelong learning in laying strong foundations for early childhood development cannot be overemphasized in the overall development of the child.

The foundations of early childhood development typically defined as the period from birth to eight years old, represents a crucial stage of human development (World Health Organisation & United Nations Children Education Fund, 2012). During this period, children experience rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth, laying the groundwork for future learning and behavior. It is a critical time for the growth and development of the child that requires attention and proper care which will have a positive influence on the all round development of the child.

Factors such as nutrition, stimulation, care-giving quality, and early learning experiences significantly influence their developmental outcomes (Abidogun 2020). Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

equally encompasses formal and informal learning opportunities designed to meet the diverse needs of adult learners, including parents and caregivers (Field, 2006). Lifelong learning emphasizes the continuous acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes throughout one's life, fostering personal development and societal advancement.

Both adult education and lifelong learning play pivotal roles in supporting parents and caregivers in understanding child development principles, enhancing caregiving practices, and fostering positive parent-child interactions (UNESCO, 2015). Intersection of Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, and Early Childhood Development programs tailored to parents and caregivers will provide essential knowledge and skills related to child development, nutrition, health, and parenting techniques. Lifelong learning will enable parents to possess necessary tools and skills that will enhance a strong foundation for early Childhood Development.

Lifelong learning initiatives empower parents and caregivers to stay updated on best practices and emerging research in early childhood development through their exposure to formal and Informal Adult Education programmes.

There are however challenges and opportunities despite the recognition of the importance of adult education and lifelong learning in ECD. Access to quality programs and resources remains uneven, particularly in marginalized communities (Heckman, 2006) In the same vain,, there are also barriers such as socioeconomic constraints, limited awareness, and cultural factors which may hinder parental engagement in educational activities.

Addressing these challenges therefore requires a multifaceted approach involving policy support, community partnerships, and innovative strategies to enhance access and participation in adult education and lifelong learning initiatives.

There are research gap and objectives while existing literature acknowledges the significance of adult education and lifelong learning in ECD, there is a need for further empirical research to elucidate the specific mechanisms through which these factors influence developmental outcomes.(Hackman 2006; Bowman & Donovan 2017). Therefore, this conceptual position paper aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of adult education and lifelong learning interventions on parental knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to early childhood development, as well as their implications for child outcomes

Historical Context of the Concepts

Historically, the recognition of the importance of adult education and lifelong learning in early childhood development has evolved alongside societal shifts in understanding the role of parents and caregivers in shaping children's outcomes. Early pioneers in education, such as Maria Montessori and Friedrich Froebel, emphasized the significance of supportive adult-child interactions and the provision of stimulating environments for optimal child development.

Over time, educational reforms and social movements have underscored the need for equitable access to educational opportunities across the lifespan, including parents and caregivers, to break cycles of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage (Fowowe & Melekewei, 2019). In some regions, community-based initiatives and grassroots movements have emerged to address the educational needs of parents and caregivers, leveraging local resources and cultural practices to support holistic child development.

International organizations, such as UNESCO and the World Bank, advocate for investments in adult education and lifelong learning as a means of promoting sustainable development and achieving global education goals, such as universal access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.(

Abidogun, 2020 and Oduolowu, 2022). Mobile-based applications, virtual parenting communities and gamified educational resources offer new avenues for engaging parents and caregivers in learning activities that support their child's development.

Interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on insights from fields such as psychology, neuroscience, and public health, are increasingly employed to inform the design and implementation of evidence-based interventions aimed at promoting positive parenting practices and enhancing family well-being.(Hackman 2006)

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory is found suitable for the paper. This theory was developed by Russian-American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It emphasizes the complex interactions between an individual and their environment across different systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

Application of the Theory

- **Microsystem (Immediate Environment):** This layer focuses on the direct interactions and relationships within a child's immediate environment, such as family, school, and community. Adult education and lifelong learning programs within these microsystems can provide parents, caregivers, and educators with the knowledge and skills needed to create nurturing and supportive environments for young children to develop optimally.
- **Mesosystem (Connections between Microsystems):** This layer explores the interactions and connections between different microsystems. In the context of early childhood development, adult education and lifelong learning initiatives can facilitate collaboration between parents, schools, community organizations, and other stakeholders, promoting holistic approaches to supporting children's growth and development. This theory emphasizes the holistic development of the child.
- **Exosystem (Indirect Environment):** The exosystem includes external environments that indirectly influence a child's development, such as societal norms, cultural values, and institutional policies. Adult education and lifelong learning efforts can advocate for policies and practices that prioritize early childhood development, ensuring access to quality education, resources, and support for children and their families.
- **Macrosystem (Broader Cultural Context):** This layer encompasses the broader cultural, societal, and historical context within which development occurs. Adult education and lifelong learning initiatives can contribute to cultural competence and awareness among caregivers and educators, recognizing the diverse needs and backgrounds of children and families in early childhood settings.

The Educational implications of Bronfenbrenner (1979) theory include:

- **Adult Education:** Recognizing the importance of various systems in shaping adult learners' experiences, adult education programs should consider not only individual characteristics but also the influence of family, community, and societal factors on learning and development.
- **Lifelong Learning:** Bronfenbrenner's theory underscores the dynamic nature of development and the continuous interaction between individuals and their environments over time. Lifelong learning initiatives should take into account these interactions and provide opportunities for individuals to engage with diverse environments across the lifespan.

- **Early Education:** Understanding the significance of early experiences within the microsystem (e.g., family, school) and the influence of broader environmental systems (e.g., community, culture) can inform early education practices. Early childhood programs should aim to create supportive environments that facilitate positive interactions between children and their immediate surroundings while considering the broader socio-cultural context.

In summary, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the interconnectedness of individuals and their environments, offering valuable insights for adult education, lifelong learning, and early childhood education by emphasizing the importance of considering multiple systems and their interactions in educational settings.

Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

Adult Education as a concept encompasses all forms of learning adults, including parents and caregivers engage in so as to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. It includes all forms of learning activities that transcend traditional schooling, basic literacy to personal fulfilment of an individual (Mbalisi, 2010). Adult Education is a practice that can take place any where for instance, in the work place, the family and through continuous courses. Adult Education according to UNESCO (2011) is defined as a form of education targeted at individuals who are regarded as adults by the society in which they belong improve their technical or professional qualifications develop their abilities enrich their knowledge with the purpose of completing a level of formal Education in order to acquire skills and knowledge and competencies in a new field, to refresh or update their knowledge in a specific field.

Lifelong learning which is a component of Adult Education is a continuous and voluntary personal pursuit of knowledge aimed at personal development and professional skills (Onyenemezu, 2013). Lifelong learning includes learning activities for people of all ages, children, young people adults, the elderly women and men in all life wide contexts including the family, school and the community (UNESCO, 2012). Lifelong learning will enable parents to be able to possess necessary tools and skills needed for their children's proper upbringing. Building strong foundation for early childhood development requires continuous learning in order to keep updated on the dynamics of early childhood development. Through adult education and lifelong learning parents and care givers would be better informed and knowledgeable about issues that bother on health, nutrition, parent and child relationship, religious and cultural values that will be inculcated into their wards. This becomes possible through their exposure to different lifelong learning activities formally and informally.

Lifelong learning will enable parents and care givers through their exposure to continuous learning to be able to contribute meaningfully to the mental growth of the child which will invariably enhance the academic capability of the child. A parent or a caregiver exposed to Adult Education/lifelong learning stands a better chance of contributing to the early childhood development of their wards particularly, the literacy development of the child which is one of the core areas of Adult Education all things being equal.

Adult education can play an important role in supporting early childhood development, as it helps to prepare parents and caregivers to provide nurturing and stimulating environments for young children. A study revealed that parent education programs were associated with improvements in parenting behaviors and the home environment, and these improvements were associated with better outcomes for children (Rolnick, Guralnick & Snider, 2002). In addition to improving parenting behaviors, adult education can also have direct benefits for children's development. Researches have shown that adult literacy programs, in particular, can improve children's reading skills, vocabulary, and other cognitive skills (Hannon &

Gomby 2006). The benefits of adult education are not just limited to cognitive skills, however. For example, one study found that mothers who participated in adult education programs were less likely to engage in harsh discipline, which can negatively affect a child's development.

Adult education can also help to reduce stress, improve mental health, and increase self-esteem for parents and caregivers (Gonzalez-DeHass, Wilkins & Holbein, 2010). In turn, these positive outcomes can lead to better interactions with children and improve children's overall well-being. Additionally, adult education can also have a positive impact on the family's economic stability, which can also impact positively on children's development (Alamprese & Garcia 2012).

Further studies have also shown that when parents and caregivers participate in adult education, their children tend to have better language and literacy skills, as well as improved social and emotional development. The specific benefits vary depending on the type of adult education program, but some of the common benefits include:

- Enhanced parent-child interactions.
- Improved language and literacy skills.
- Increased positive behavior.
- Better social skills.
- Reduced rates of behavior problems.

It's worth noting that the benefits of adult education may be especially important for low-income families, as they may not have access to the same resources as higher-income families.(Heckman & Diris 2013).

According to UNESCO, (2012) Adult education programmes are mostly effective in promoting early childhood development in the following ways:

- **Parenting Education Programs:** These programs provide parents and caregivers with knowledge and skills to support their children's development. They often cover topics such as child nutrition, health, early literacy, and positive discipline techniques. A meta-analysis by Sweet and Appleton (2004) found that parenting education programs positively impact children's cognitive development and school readiness.
- **Literacy and Language Development Programs:** Adult literacy programs that include components focused on improving parents' literacy skills and promoting language-rich environments at home have been shown to benefit young children. For example, a study by Wasik & Bond (2001) demonstrated that parents' participation in literacy programs was associated with improved language development in preschool-aged children.
- **Early Childhood Education Courses for Adults:** These programs provide adults with knowledge about child development theories, effective teaching strategies, and age-appropriate activities. By enhancing adults' understanding of early childhood development, they are better equipped to support children's learning and growth. A study by Burchinal, et al. (2011) found that teachers' participation in professional development programs positively influenced children's cognitive and social-emotional development.
- **Home Visiting Programs:** Home visiting programs involve trained professionals or volunteers visiting families in their homes to provide support, guidance, and resources related to parenting and child development. These programs often focus on high-risk families and aim to improve parenting practices and children's outcomes. Evidence from randomized controlled trials, such as the Nurse-Family Partnership program, suggests that home visiting programs can lead to positive

outcomes for both parents and children (Olds, et al., 2004).

- **Integrated Family Support Services:** These programs offer a comprehensive array of services to families, including adult education, parenting support, child care assistance, health services, and social services. By addressing multiple needs within the family, these programs can have a more significant impact on children's development. A longitudinal study by Brooks-Gunn, et al (2002) found that comprehensive family support programs were associated with improved cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children.

These types of adult education programs are effective in promoting early childhood development because they recognize the critical role of adults in children's lives and provide them with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to create nurturing and stimulating environments for their children.

The quality of adult education programmes significantly influences their effectiveness in promoting early childhood development in the following Areas;

- **Content Relevance:** Adult education programs that focus on topics related to child development, parenting skills, and early childhood education are more likely to positively impact caregivers' understanding and ability to support children's development. References to child psychology, educational theories, and practical strategies are crucial.
- **Pedagogical Approaches:** High-quality adult education employs interactive, participatory and experiential learning methods. This not only engages caregivers effectively but also models effective teaching practices that they can apply when interacting with children.
- **Accessibility and Inclusivity:** Programs that are accessible to a diverse range of caregivers, including those from marginalized communities, non-native speakers or individuals with disabilities, ensure that all children have equal opportunities for development. Relevant references might include studies on the importance of inclusivity in education.
- **Continuous Support and Resources:** Effective programs offer ongoing support beyond the classroom, providing caregivers with resources, guidance, and networks to reinforce their learning and address specific challenges they encounter in promoting early childhood development. References could include studies on the importance of ongoing support in adult education.
- **Collaboration and Community Engagement:** Programs that foster collaboration among caregivers, educators, and community stakeholders create a supportive environment for promoting early childhood development. References might include research on the benefits of community involvement in education.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regular assessment of program outcomes and participant feedback allows for continuous improvement and ensures that the program remains responsive to the needs of caregivers and children. Relevant references could include studies on the importance of monitoring and evaluation in educational programs.

According to Merriam, et al. (2007), Adult education programmes face several challenges when promoting early childhood development, among them includes:

- **Awareness:** Many adults may not fully understand the importance of early childhood development

or their role in supporting it.

- **Time constraints:** Adults participating in education programs may have limited time due to work, family responsibilities, or other commitments, making it challenging to prioritize learning about early childhood development.
- **Limited resources:** Adult education programs may lack resources such as materials, trained instructors, or access to relevant information about early childhood development.
- **Cultural barriers:** Cultural beliefs and practices can influence attitudes towards early childhood development, and some adults may be resistant to new ideas or approaches.
- **Language barriers:** In multilingual communities, language barriers can hinder effective communication and understanding of early childhood development concepts.
- **Accessibility:** Access to adult education programs, especially in rural or under served areas, may be limited, preventing some adults from participating in learning opportunities related to early childhood development.
- **Stigma:** There may be stigma associated with adult education or seeking help with parenting or childcare, which can discourage adults from engaging in programs focused on early childhood development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, adult education and lifelong learning play pivotal roles in establishing robust foundations for early childhood development. Through continuous learning opportunities, adults acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create supportive environments for children's growth and development (Brown, 2019). By engaging in programs such as parenting classes, workshops, and community-based initiatives, adults gain insights into effective caregiving practices, promoting positive parent-child interactions (Clark & Morris, 2020). Moreover, lifelong learning empowers adults to stay informed about advancements in child development research and pedagogical strategies, enabling them to adapt and respond effectively to the evolving needs of children (Alheit, 2018). Additionally, adult education fosters collaboration among stakeholders, including educators, parents, policymakers, and community members, to create holistic approaches to early childhood development (Kilpatrick, 2017). Through collaborative efforts, diverse perspectives converge to address multifaceted challenges, ultimately enhancing the quality of early childhood experiences (Hartas, 2019). Therefore, investing in adult education and lifelong learning initiatives is essential for building strong foundations in early childhood development, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

Recommendations

1. Government policies should provide more opportunities for parents and caregivers to take advantage of Adult Education and lifelong learning programmes.
2. Different mechanisms for continuous evaluation and meaningful family education programmes that will also encourage feed back from the beneficiaries should be put in place.
3. Various NGOs with family advocacy programmes should give priority to adult education and lifelong learning programmes for the benefit of early childhood development through their various

advocacies.

4. Since the family is the smallest unit of the society, religious bodies should endeavor to address the role of parents and caregivers in early childhood development for character training.
5. Educational institutions should endeavor to include in the curriculum, programmes that would prepare parents and would be parents for their roles in contributing to early childhood development,
6. Holistic Programmes that will include adult education and lifelong learning activities alongside early childhood development initiatives should be encouraged. This will provide parents and caregivers with resources, workshops and support programmes that will contribute to their understanding of child development and parenting styles.
7. Educational curriculum should be channeled to the needs and literacy levels of adult learners that would focus on practical skills such as result oriented discipline techniques early literacy development and nutritional education.
8. Partnerships with communities, organisations, schools, healthcare providers and social service agencies should be encouraged to expand access to adult education and lifelong learning opportunities for families.
9. There should be accessibility of resources through various media, like online platforms, mobile applications, workshops to give room to diverse learning activities. Service providers should be encouraged to strengthen their services.
10. There should be continuous support and mentorship programmes available to parents and caregivers as they engage in early childhood development. Opportunities for peer learning and professional guidance should be made available by Early Childhood care professionals.
11. There should also be collaborative efforts between adult education providers, early childhood practitioners health care Professionals to facilitate the dissemination of information and resources to enhance wholesome and holistic child development.
12. Policy makers, educators and community stakeholders must collaborate to prioritize and invest in the adult education initiatives, recognizing their profound impact on shaping the future generation.

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