

Early Childhood Edupreneurship in Rivers State: Nurturing Innovation in Education

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Abstract

The study examined early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State: nurturing innovation in education. The research design used for the study is the descriptive survey design. Three objectives and research questions guided the study. The population of the study was 411 (137 headteachers and 274 educators) from early childhood education centers attached to public primary schools in Rivers State. Simple random sampling was used to select 69 headteachers and 137 educators which amounts to 206 respondents. The instrument used for data collection in this study was a fixed response questionnaire, titled Early Childhood Edupreneurship: Nurturing Innovation in Education Questionnaire. The data obtained were collated, organized, analyzed, and presented using suitable statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation in answering the research questions. The findings revealed that, respondents agreed on all the variable items concerning how innovative educational practices can be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes, the role government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship, and strategies that can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State. It was recommended that the state government should establish policies that encourage and support the integration of innovative practices in ECE. This includes setting standards for curriculum innovation, technology use, and professional development, the government should develop and implement clear regulatory frameworks that provide guidance for starting and operating early childhood education businesses, and the government should implement a comprehensive public awareness campaign to educate communities about the benefits of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship.

Keywords: Early Childhood Edupreneurship, Nuturing, Innovation, Education

Introduction

In recent year, the landscape of education in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation, with a particular emphasis on early childhood education (ECE) as a vital foundation for lifelong learning. Rivers State, a region rich in cultural diversity and economic

potential, has emerged as a noteworthy hub for early childhood edupreneurship, where innovative educational practices are reshaping the way young children are nurtured and educated. Edupreneurship, focuses on developing creative solutions to educational challenges, promoting sustainable practices, and improving the quality of education in underserved communities. The early years of the child's life are critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Research underscores the importance of quality early childhood education in shaping future academic success and overall well-being. In Rivers State, where access to quality educational resources can be limited, edupreneurs are stepping in to bridge the gap, offering diverse and innovative educational programmes tailored to meet the unique needs of children and their families. This burgeoning sector is not providing educational services but is also driving economic growth, creating job opportunities, and fostering community engagement.

Early childhood edupreneurs in Rivers State are leveraging various approaches to enhance learning experiences. These include the integration of technology in classrooms, development of culturally relevant curricula, and the establishment of community-based initiatives that involve parents and caregivers in the educational process. By tapping into local resources and knowledge, edupreneurs are crafting programmes that resonate with the community while addressing broader educational challenges. Moreover, the government and stakeholders are recognizing the potential of early childhood edupreneurship to foster innovation and improve educational outcomes. Policies and initiatives aimed at supporting early childhood education are being implemented, creating a conducive environment for edupreneurs to thrive. This aligns Kraft, Blazar and Horgan (2018) who opined that collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and private sector actors is essential in building a robust framework that supports innovative educational practices.

Therefore, early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State represents a dynamic intersection of education and innovation. As these edupreneurs continue to emerge and expand, they play a crucial role in shaping the future of education in the region. By nurturing creativity, fostering collaboration, and focusing on the holistic development of children, early childhood edupreneurship holds the promise of transforming educational outcomes and contributing to the sustainable development of Rivers State. It is evident that the potential for innovation in early childhood education is vast, and the commitment to nurturing this potential is essential for the next generation Hsin, Li, & Tsai, (2014).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the critical importance of early childhood education (ECE) in fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development, Rivers State faces several challenges that hinder the effective implementation and expansion of quality ECE programmes. Access to quality educational resources remains a significant barrier, particularly in underserved communities where infrastructure is lacking, and trained educators are scarce. This gap in access limits the opportunities available to young children, depriving them of essential learning experiences that are crucial for their future success.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for innovative educational solutions that cater to the diverse cultural contexts and learning needs of children in Rivers State. Many existing educational programmes are not tailored to the local environment, resulting in a disconnect and the children's real-life experiences. This lack of relevance can lead to disengagement and underperformance among young learners. Furthermore, while early childhood edupreneurship has the potential to address these issues through creative and sustainable approaches, many aspiring edupreneurs face significant challenges in terms of funding, professional development, and regulatory support. The lack of a cohesive framework to promote and support edupreneurship in ECE limits the growth of innovative initiatives that could enhance the quality of education. Moreover, there is often insufficient collaboration between government bodies, educational institutions, and community organizations, which stifles the sharing of resources and best practices. Without a unified effort to address these challenges, the potential of early childhood edupreneurship to transform education in Rivers State remains largely untapped.

In summary, the key problems affecting early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State include inadequate access to quality educational resources, a lack of culturally relevant curricula, insufficient support for aspiring edupreneurs, and the need for greater collaboration among stakeholders. Addressing these issues is essential for harnessing the full potential of early childhood education and ensuring that all children in Rivers State could thrive.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State: Nurturing innovation in education. The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. Ascertain how innovative educational practices can be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State to enhance learning outcomes.
2. Identify the roles government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State.
3. Find strategies that can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State

Research Questions

1. How can innovative educational practices be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State to enhance learning outcomes?
2. What role do government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State?
3. What strategies can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State?

Literature Review

Overview of Early Childhood Edupreneurship

Early childhood edupreneurship refers to the integration of entrepreneurial principles within the context of early childhood education (ECE). It involves the creation, development, and implementation of innovative educational programmes and services aimed at enhancing the learning experiences of young children, typically ranging from birth to age eight. Edupreneurs identify gaps in the existing educational landscape and leverage resources, creativity, and business strategies to establish solutions that address the unique needs of children and their families. The early years of a child's life are critical for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Desimone, 2009). Research indicates that high-quality early childhood education can lead to better academic outcomes, improved social skills, and enhanced emotional well-being. Edupreneurs play a vital role in this domain by introducing innovative educational practices, curricula, and learning environments that promote holistic development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Concept of Innovation in Education

Innovation in education refers to the introduction and implementation of new ideas, methods, technologies, and practices designed to enhance learning outcomes, improve teaching

effectiveness, and address the evolving needs of students and society. Neumann & Neumann (2014) stated that it involves rethinking traditional approaches to education to create more engaging, effective, and inclusive learning environment. Bell, Blair, Crawford & Evertson (2010) defined innovation in education as the process of making significant changes to the educational system, whether in curriculum design, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, or the use of technology. These changes are intended to improve student learning, increase educational equity, and better prepare learners for the challenges of the 21st century. Innovation may involve adoption of new tools and resources, the application of research-based practices, or the creation of entirely new educational models. According to Epstein (2011) the key aspect of educational innovation includes curriculum innovation, pedagogical innovation, Assessment innovation, school and classroom environment, and personal development.

How Innovative Educational Practices can be Effectively Integrated into Early Childhood Education Programmes

Integrating innovative educational practices into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State presents both opportunities and challenges. This integration is crucial for enhancing learning outcomes, particularly in a region where educational infrastructure and access to quality education are often inconsistent. To achieve this effectively, Pedersen & Liu (2003) averred that several critical factors need to be considered:

Curriculum Adaptation: Any innovative practice must be adapted to the cultural and social context of Rivers. For instance, integrating local languages and culturally relevant stories can make learning more relatable and engaging for children. A curriculum that reflects the communities will resonate more with young learners. The curriculum should integrate play-based learning, creative arts, and technology while considering the varying developmental stages of children Hakkarainen, Palonen & Paavola (2009).

Teacher Training and Professional Development: Teachers are the cornerstone of early childhood education. For innovation to take root, educators must be well-trained and supported. This requires ongoing professional development that emphasizes modern pedagogical approaches, such as inquiry-based learning, technology integration, and differentiated instruction. Creating networks of educators where they can share experiences, challenges, and strategies for implementing innovative preces is crucial (Pedersen & Liu, (2003).

Infrastructure and Resources: Integrating digital tools can enhance learning, but the disparity in access to technology across Rivers State needs to be addressed. This includes not just providing hardware but also ensuring internet connectivity and digital literacy for both teachers and students. There should be a focus on developing and distributing age-appropriate learning materials that align with the innovative practices being introduced. This includes both physical and digital resources (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Singer, 2011).

Community and Parental engagement: The successful implementation of innovative practices requires buy-in of the community and parents. Educators should engage parents through workshops, meetings, and regular communication to help them understand the benefits of new educational approaches. Given the diversity in Rivers State, innovative practices should respect and incorporate local traditions and knowledge. This not only enhances learning outcomes but also fosters a sense of identity and belonging in young children (Epstein, 2011).

The Role Government Policies and Regulatory Frameworks Play in Monitoring Early Childhood Edupreneurship

Government policies and regulatory frameworks play a crucial role in monitoring early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State, shaping the landscape in which private educational enterprises operate. These policies and frameworks ensure that early childhood education (ECE) providers maintain standards that safeguard the quality of education, child welfare, and the overall development of young learners. Below are key roles these government interventions play:

Establishing Minimum Standards for Quality: Government policies set minimum standards for the curriculum and teaching methodologies that early childhood education providers must adhere to. These standards ensure that edupreneurs provide a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and culturally relevant. They also encourage the use of best practices in early childhood pedagogy. Regulatory frameworks specify the qualifications and training that educators must have to teach in early childhood settings. This is crucial for ensuring that children receive instruction from professionals who understand early childhood development and are equipped to provide a safe and stimulating learning environment (Zaslow & Bloom, 2010).

Licensing and Accreditation: Edupreneurs in the early childhood sector must obtain the necessary licenses and accreditation from government to operate. The process involves compliance with regulations regarding infrastructure, health and safety standards, teacher-student ratios, and other operational aspects (Kauffman, 2012). The government is responsible for conducting regular

inspections and audits to ensure ongoing compliance with these standards. This helps in identifying and addressing issues such as overcrowding, lack of resources, or unqualified staff in early childhood centers.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Government frameworks facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of early childhood education providers. This includes assessing the effectiveness of educational programmes, the learning outcomes of children, and the overall impact of the entrepreneurial initiatives on child development. Policies often require early childhood education centers to collect and report data on various indicators such as enrollment rates, learning outcomes, and teacher performance (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

Strategies Employed to Raise Awareness about the Importance of Early Childhood Education and the Role of Edupreneurship

Raising awareness about the importance of early childhood education (ECE) and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State requires a multifaceted approach that engages various stakeholders, including, parents, educators, community leaders, and government officials. The following strategies can be employed to effectively increase awareness and promote the value of ECE and edupreneurship:

Community Engagement and Mobilization: Organizing town hall meetings, workshops, and community forums can be effective way to engage parents, caregivers, and community leaders. These events can provide a platform to discuss the benefits of early childhood education, share success stories and highlight the role of edupreneurs in enhancing educational outcomes (Strouse & Gervais, 2014). Leveraging the influence of traditional rulers, religious leaders, and other respected community figures can help amplify the message.

Mass Media Campaigns: Utilizing popular radio and television stations in Rivers State to broadcast educational programmes, talk shows, and advertisements focused on ECE can reach a wide audience. These programmes can feature experts, educators, and parents discussing the long-term benefits of early education and the role of private educational initiatives. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are widely used in Rivers State and can be powerful tools for raising awareness.

Storytelling and Testimonies: Sharing success stories of children who have benefitted from early childhood education and testimonials from parents can be a powerful way to illustrate the impact of ECE. These stories can be disseminated through various media channels, community meetings,

and school events. Producing documentaries or short films that depict the day-to-day activities in early childhood centers and the developmental progress of children can be an engaging way to raise awareness. These can be shown in local cinemas, schools, and during community events.

Theoretical Framework

Entrepreneurial Education Theory

This paper is anchored on Entrepreneurial Education Theory. This theory focuses on fostering entrepreneurial skills, mindsets, and behaviours through educational processes, emphasizing innovation, creativity, and problem-solving from an early age. Early childhood edupreneurship can be seen as an application of entrepreneurial education theory in the context of early childhood education. The theory suggests that entrepreneurship is not just about starting businesses but about instilling a mindset of innovation and creativity. When applied to early childhood education, this means creating an environment where young children are encouraged to explore, create, and think independently. This aligns with the concept of nurturing innovation in education, as it emphasizes the importance of developing these skills early in life, potentially leading to a generation of innovators and creative thinkers.

The relevance of Entrepreneurial Education Theory lies in its potential to transform traditional educational practices. By integrating entrepreneurial principles into early childhood education, educators can foster a more dynamic, innovative, and student-centered approach to learning. This theory supports the idea that young children can engage in creative and entrepreneurial thinking, which can lead to long-term benefits in their educational journey and future careers. Additionally, it highlights the importance of educators as “edupreneurs” who can innovate and adapt to meet the needs of 21st century learners.

Methodology

The research design that was used for this study is the descriptive survey design. The population of the study was 411 (137 headteachers and 274 educators) from early childhood education centers attached to public primary schools in Rivers State. Then through a process of simple random sampling the researchers selected 69 headteachers and 137 educators which amounts to 206 respondents. The instrument used for data collection in this study was a fixed response questionnaire, titled “Early Childhood Edupreneurship: Nurturing Innovation in

Education Questionnaire (ECENIEQ)". The data obtained were collated, organized, analyzed, and presented using suitable statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation in answering the research questions.

Results

Research Question 1: How can innovative educational practices be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State to enhance learning outcomes?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of how Innovative Educational Practices can be Effectively Integrated into Early Childhood Education Programmes in Rivers State to Enhance Learning Outcomes

S/N	Items	Headteachers		Educators		Total Mean
		— X	SD	— X	SD	
1	Identifying effective innovative practices (for example, play-based learning, STEAM, and so on	2.63	0.98	3.18	0.64	2.91
2	Assessing programme needs and readiness for innovation	2.89	0.83	3.08	0.80	2.99
3	Developing strategies for seamless integration (for example, teacher training, curriculum alignment)	3.03	0.65	2.98	0.90	3.01
4	Addressing potential barriers to implementation (example, resources, resistance to change)	2.51	1.03	2.61	1.18	2.56
5	Fostering a culture of innovation and experimentation	3.12	0.86	3.15	0.72	3.14
6	Evaluating the impact of innovative practices on learning outcomes	3.00	1.00	2.73	0.81	2.87
7	Scaling and sustaining innovative approaches	3.15	0.72	2.91	1.01	3.03
8	Collaborating with stakeholders (educators, administrators, parents)	2.89	0.99	3.22	0.75	3.06
9	Leveraging technology and digital resources to enhance learning	2.77	0.83	2.86	0.97	2.82
10	Ensuring equity and inclusivity in innovative programme design	2.50	0.94	2.66	0.89	2.58

The data on table 1 showed that headteachers and educators generally agreed on how innovative educational practices can be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State to enhance learning outcomes. Based on the responses of these respondents to the question posed it is obvious that the respondents agreed on all the items from 1-10.

Research Question 2: What role do government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Role Government Policies and Regulatory Frameworks Play in Promoting Early Childhood Edupreneurship in Rivers State

S/N	Items	Headteachers		Teachers		Total Mean
		— X	SD	— X	SD	
11	Incentives for innovation (for example, funding, tax breaks)	2.55	0.99	2.98	1.04	2.77
12	Regulatory barriers to entry (for example, licensing, accreditation)	3.09	0.89	3.12	0.74	3.11
13	Policy initiatives supporting early childhood education	2.91	0.87	3.08	0.81	3.00
14	Public-private partnerships and collaborations	2.97	0.91	2.83	1.06	2.90
15	Impact of government funding on edupreneurial ventures	3.07	0.78	2.75	0.93	2.91
16	Role of policy in addressing equity and access issues	3.09	0.70	2.97	0.90	3.03
17	Balancing regulation with innovation and autonomy	2.95	1.01	3.01	0.80	2.98
18	Encouraging experimentation and risk-taking in early childhood education	2.92	0.85	3.19	0.85	3.06
19	Developing policies that support edupreneurial ecosystems	2.89	0.90	2.99	1.06	2.94
20	Evaluating the effectiveness of government policies in promoting edupreneurship	3.10	0.84	3.05	0.92	3.08

The data on table 2 showed that the respondents generally agreed on all the variable items concerning the role government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State. This can be attested to by the total mean which ranged from 2.77 to 3.11 which is higher than the criterion mean of 2.50.

Research Question 3: What strategies can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Strategies to be Employed to Raise Awareness About the Importance of Early Childhood Education and the Role of Edupreneurship in Rivers State

S/N	Items	Headteachers		Teachers		Total Mean
		— SD	— SD	— SD	— SD	

		X		X		
21	Organizing town hall meetings to engage parents and caregivers	2.63	0.98	3.18	0.64	2.91
22	Hosting events, conferences, and workshops to showcase innovative approaches	2.89	0.83	3.08	0.80	2.99
23	Collaborating with policymakers and stakeholders to raise awareness	3.03	0.65	2.98	0.90	3.01
24	Developing targeted campaigns to reach specific audiences (parents, educators and so on)	2.51	1.03	2.61	1.18	2.56
25	Empowering ambassadors and champions for early childhood edupreneurship	3.12	0.86	3.15	0.72	3.14
26	Leveraging data and research to make the case for early childhood education	3.00	1.00	2.73	0.81	2.87
27	Developing compelling narratives and messaging	3.15	0.72	2.91	1.01	3.03
28	Building partnerships with influencers, organizations, and communities	2.89	0.99	3.22	0.75	3.06
29	Effective communication channels (social media, events, etcetera)	2.77	0.83	2.86	0.97	2.82
30	Measuring and evaluating the impact of awareness-raising efforts	2.50	0.94	2.66	0.89	2.58

The data on table 3 showed that all the strategies variables considered on research question 3 were all generally agreed upon as strategies that can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State. Based on the responses of headteachers and educators who constituted the respondents of the study on this research question, it is apparent that item 25 which states: empowering ambassadors and champions for early childhood edupreneurship with a mean 3.14 has the highest total mean.

Discussion of Findings

On the first research question which considered how innovative educational practices can be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State to enhance learning outcomes, the researchers discovered that respondents affirmatively agreed that identifying effective innovative practices (for example, play-based learning, STEAM, and so on; assessing programme needs and readiness for innovation; developing strategies for seamless integration (for example, teacher training, curriculum alignment); addressing potential barriers to implementation (example, resources, resistance to change); fostering a culture of innovation and experimentation; evaluating the impact of innovative practices on learning outcomes; scaling and

sustaining innovative approaches; collaborating with stakeholders (educators, administrators, parents); leveraging technology and digital resources to enhance learning and ensuring equity and inclusivity in innovative programme design are innovative educational practices that can be effectively integrated into early childhood education programmes in Rivers State to enhance learning outcomes. This aligns with Epstein (2011) that educators should engage parents through workshops, meetings, and regular communication to help them understand the benefits of new educational approaches as it enhances learning outcomes and fosters a sense of identity and belonging in young children.

The second research question analyzed what role government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship in Rivers State, it was revealed that respondents generally agreed on all the variable items concerning the role government policies and regulatory frameworks play in promoting early childhood edupreneurship. The aggregate mean which ranged from 2.77 to 3.11 which is higher than the criterion mean of 2.50. According to Zaslow & Bloom, (2010) one of the role of regulatory frameworks is to specify the qualifications and training that educators must have to teach in early childhood settings which ensures that children receive instruction from professionals who understand early childhood development and are equipped to provide a safe and stimulating learning environment.

The third research question determined the strategies that can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship in Rivers State. Based on the analyzed result, it is apparent that all the strategy variables considered on research question 3 were all agreed upon as effective strategies that can be employed in raising awareness about the importance of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship. From the responses of headteachers and educators who constituted the respondents of the study on this research question, it is apparent that all items exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50. Such high means reflects that these variables item are effective strategies. This agrees with Strouse & Gervais (2014) that organizing town hall meetings, workshops, and community forums to engage parents, caregivers, and community leaders is a strategy that can be employed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood edupreneurship.

Conclusion

Early childhood edupreneurship represents a dynamic intersection of education and entrepreneurship, focusing on the innovative practices that can enhance the quality and accessibility of early childhood education (ECE). As the field continues to evolve, it becomes increasingly vital to explore the various strategies that edupreneurs employ to address the diverse needs of young children and their families. This overview highlights the importance of integrating technology, adopting play-based and culturally relevant pedagogies, fostering community engagement, and prioritizing professional development among educators. While substantial research has been conducted in these areas, notable gaps remain, including the need for contextual studies, longitudinal research, and a deeper understanding of stakeholder perspectives. Addressing these gaps is crucial for informing the development of effective education programmes and ensuring that they are sustainable and equitable. Moreover, as the demand for quality early childhood education grows, supporting early childhood edupreneurs through funding, training, and collaborative partnerships will be essential. By leveraging the insights from existing theories and research, stakeholders can foster an environment that nurtures innovation, enhances learning outcomes, and ultimately contributes to the holistic development of children.

In summary, the potential of early childhood edupreneurship to transform ECE is immense. With continued research, collaboration, and a commitment to innovation, we can create enriching educational experiences that empower young children, support families, and strengthen communities. As we move forward, it is essential to embrace the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, ensuring that all children have access to high-quality early learning experiences that lay a solid foundation for their future success.

Recommendations

The researchers made the following recommendations:

1. The state government should establish policies that encourage and support the integration of innovative practices in ECE. This includes setting standards for curriculum innovation, technology use, and professional development.
2. The government should develop and implement clear regulatory frameworks that provide guidance for starting and operating early childhood education businesses.

3. The government should implement a comprehensive public awareness campaign to educate communities about the benefits of early childhood education and the role of edupreneurship.

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