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EARLY CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION: SERVING CHILDREN BEST INTEREST THROUGH BEST PRACTICES

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Abstract.

This paper examined three major approaches to teaching the under 5 year old children. In an attempt to discover the best practices, the researchers used UNICEF standards for best practices and NAEYC framework for Developmentally Appropriate Practice which is regarded as benchmarks for determining best practices. High/Scope, Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches were carefully selected among many approaches and were critically explored based on the indicators of best practices. High/Scope approach which is cognitively oriented is acclaimed to be widely accepted because of its accessibility to the poor and the rich. The central themes of High/Scope approach are: active learning, Learning environment, daily schedule, plan-do-review, adult-child interaction, Key developmental indicators, assessment and conflict resolution. The Reggio Emilia approach is viewed as a resource and inspiration to help educators, parents, and children as they work together to further develop their own educational programs. The Reggio Emilia approach is based upon the principles of emergent curriculum, project work, representational development and collaboration, teachers as researchers, etc. Montessori approach to education of young children is based on children's spontaneous activities. The success of this approach is based on availability of Montessori materials, spiritual preparation which makes them different from the traditional teachers and the prepared environment. Some of the benefits of the three approaches were also examined. At the end, this study recommended an eclectic approach to teaching, adequate preparation of teachers, hands on activities and prepared environment. In conclusion, since no one approach is comprehensive to meet the standard of best practices, an eclectic approach to teaching is recommended in the early years classroom in order to bring out the best in the child.

Key words: *Early Childhood Education, Early Childcare and Education, best interest, best practices.*

school children are provided opportunities that can support their development in all these areas. Play can play a vital role in this process. This is because play influences all areas of development. This is why Shackell, Butler, Doyle and Ball (2008) submit that playing allows children to develop a sense of well-being, develops their emotional responses and improves their interpersonal skills. It involves exploration and creativity, helping children think in a flexible manner, developing the creative process, language skills, and learning and problem solving skills.

One of the ways by which children can be given opportunity to experience holistic development through play is by engaging them in water and sand play. Water and sand play can provide opportunities for children to experience development in all these domains and they can serve as means of guaranteeing right of children to play. The reason for this is because water and sand play can help children to engage in leisure and creative activities through playful experiences thereby ensuring that they enjoy their rights to play. McMillan (2014) notes that water play is suited to all children regardless of the child's ability or disability, age, language, gender, culture

or needs, and is a wonderful learning tool. In their words, Crowther&Wellhousen (2004) submit that water play is a magical medium as it has been used to soothe, relax, teach, enjoy and sustain.

Water play can help in diverse ways to help children acquire problem-solving and thinking skills (Crowther&Wellhousen, 2004; Wallace, White& Stone, 2010; McMillan, 2012). It can aid the learning of Mathematics concepts such as empty, full, more, less, heavy, light, shallow, deep, greater than, less than (Crowther&Wellhousen, 2004; Ralton and Young, 2008; Wallace, et al, 2010; Gross, 2012; McMillan, 2014). Children can also learn to develop scientific skills during water play as it creates curiosity in them (Crowther&Wellhousen, 2004; Ralton and Young, 2008; Gross, 2012; McMillan, 2014). This implies that water play helps children to explore nature and develop habits for continuous learning. Physical skills also develop during water play as it allows children to use small and large muscles when they lift buckets, fit plastic tubes on to funnels, pour water from container to container or to squeeze bottles and sponges. Children have the opportunity to practice eye-hand coordination as they pick things in water,

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continual development of teaching skills; developmental appropriateness of the curriculum; plentiful materials to stimulate learning; a developmental focus that meets the needs of the whole child; a programme that emphasizes language development and a print-rich environment; a programme that encourages exploration and discovery.

It is therefore against the foregoing, that this study examined the position of three major approaches (High/Scope, Reggio Emilia and Montessori) as instrument for achieving best practice in early childhood classrooms in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework
Several theories of child development and learning have influenced school's readiness and how best children should learn both in the classroom and at home. However, for the purpose of this study, the researchers found the environmentalist theory of Lev Vygotsky and constructive theory most appropriate. Environmentalist theory suggests that the environment shapes the total learning and behaviour of the child. The theory posits that children develop and acquire knowledge by reacting to their environment. What this translates to is that schools and parents must ensure that there is a prepared environment to facilitate the right learning experience for the child. Constructive theory stands on the fact that learning and development occur when young children interact with their environment and the people around them. However, these young children must be found to be active and participate in the learning process as they must initiate most of the activities require for learning and development. The relevance of these two theories is that the theories and the aforementioned approaches share similarities.

There are many approaches and methods that are claiming to be best practices but research findings have documented the effects that High/Scope approach, Emilia Reggio and Montessori methods had on children. This study is therefore focusing on these three approaches and their distinguishing characteristics that made them suitable as best practices to be employed in teaching the under five years old.

According to Wikipedia encyclopedia, the philosophy behind High/Scope approach is based on child development theory and research, originally drawing on the work of Jean Piaget, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, especially the strategy of adult scaffolding — supporting children at their current developmental level and helping them build upon it in a social setting where children have opportunities to choose materials, ideas, and people to interact within the projects they initiate.

High/Scope approach can be defined as an open frame work of educational ideas, practices, and methods of teaching which allows teachers to create effective early childhood programme. High/Scope approach to teaching is regarded as the world's most respected child assessment because of its components which makes early childhood learning effective. The origin of High/Scope started in the Ypsilanti precisely Michigan public school district. The poor performance of children from impoverished neighbourhoods on district level standardized test drew the attention of David Weikart who became increasingly interested in the academic performance of the children. Weikart brought together a committee of elementary educational leaders to discuss possible changes in teaching methods and curriculum choices even though they did not expect rapid changes. While searching for better teaching methods and programmes, he focused on children between the ages or three to four year old and

hired four teachers who began the operation of the school at Perry elementary school. This brought a positive change in the children's performance.

The Principles and Goals of The High/Scope approach are: to develop in children a broad range of skills, including the problem solving, interpersonal, and communication skills that are essential for successful living in a rapidly changing society; the curriculum encourages student initiative by providing children with materials, equipment, and time to pursue activities they choose.

At the same time, it provides teachers with a framework for guiding children's independent activities toward sequenced learning goals; teacher plays a key role in instructional activities by selecting appropriate, developmentally sequenced materials and by encouraging children to adopt an active problem solving approach to learning; this teacher-student interaction helps children to achieve developmentally sequenced goals while also encouraging them to set many of their own goals uniquely which distinguishes the High/Scope curriculum from direct instruction and child centered curricula, (High/ Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1989).

The central concepts in High/Scope approach are: active partipatory learning, learning environment, daily routine, plan-do-review, adult- interaction, key developmental indicators, assessment, and the curriculum content. Active Learning focus on the idea that children are the source of their own learning forms the center of the High/Scope curriculum. Teachers support children's active learning by providing a variety of materials, making plans and reviewing activities with children, interacting with and carefully observing individual children, and leading small and large group active learning activities. The High/Scope

learning environment is divided into learning centres. Holman and Weihart (2002) define learning centres as independent stations set up throughout the classroom where children can go to actually engage in some learning activities. The classroom is divided into visible learning corners, e.g. Block area, Numeracy, Literacy, Art, Science, Cookery, Water-play areas, etc. The learning centre approach provides a time when children explore and practice skills to their own satisfaction. These centres provide children with hands- on learning, cooperative learning and open-ended activities. Learning centres should reflect the goal of active learning; they must not be work stations full of worksheets for pupils to complete. Learning centres offer opportunity for children to be responsible for their own learning; this responsibility is the foundation for lifelong learning (Stone, 1995).

Daily Schedule

The schedule considers developmental levels of children, incorporates a sixty to seventy minute plan-do-review process, provides for content areas as consistent throughout the day as possible, and contains a minimum number of transitions.

The plan-de-review process is an important part of the High/Scope approach and is one worthy of your particular attention. The plan- do-review is a sequence in which children with the help of the teacher, initiate plans for projects or activities; work in learning centres to implement their plans and then review what they have done with the teacher and their fellow classmates.

Assessment

Teachers keep notes about significant behaviours, changes, statements, and things that help them better understand a child's way of thinking and learning. Teachers use two

mechanisms to help them collect data; the key experiences note form and a portfolio. The High/Scope Child Observation Record is also used to assess children's development. Assessment of growth and overall development of the child is achieved using growth monitoring equipment and developmental mile stones.

Key Developmental Indicators

The High/Scope Curriculum is organized into eight content areas which are: (1) creative representation; (2) language, literacy, and communication; (3) social and emotional development; (4) physical development and health; (5) mathematics; (6) science and technology; (7) social studies; and (8) creative arts. Within these content areas are 58 key developmental indicators (KDIs). The KDIs are statements of observable behaviours that define the important learning areas for young children. High/Scope teachers keep these indicators in mind when they set up the learning environment and plan activities.

Curriculum

The High/Scope curriculum comes from two sources: children's interests and the key experiences, which are lists of observable learning behaviours. Basing a curriculum in part on children's interests is very constructive and implements the philosophies of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky. It is the total situation through which the school makes behavioural changes in those who pass through it.

Conflict Resolution

As young as the children are, High/Scope approach enables them to develop skills that help them to resolve conflicts and copying mechanism in real life situations. The first step in this conflict resolution process is for the adult in the environment to approach the situation

calmly. Observe the situation, approach the children with a calm voice, and sit with them on the floor. Secondly, acknowledge children's feelings; describe the feeling you observe and the details of what you see. Thirdly, the adult is expected to gather information from the pupils. Ask open ended questions, directing your questions to one child, then another. The fourth step is to restate the problem. Based on what the children say, clarify the problem and check your statement with the children. A further step is to ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together. Encourage children to talk to each other. Be prepared to give suggestions. When children arrive at a solution, restate it and check with them to make sure they are in agreement. Lastly, be prepared to give follow-up support (Hohmann, Weikart, & Epstein, 2008).

There are a number of advantages to implementing the High/Scope approach. David (2002) recorded a longitudinal research conducted which compared children taught with High/Scope approach with those taught with conventional approach. The findings revealed that children that attended High/Scope schools had better educational and life outcomes than children that attended schools where teacher-directed approaches were used. Similarly, children that were taught with High/Scope approach had more stable marriages, higher social status; recorded less life time criminality, had more stable higher economic outcome and income and received less government assistance. In addition, it offers a method for implementing a constructivist based programme that has its roots in Dewey's philosophy and Piagetian cognitive theory. It is widely popular and has been extensively researched and tested. There is a vast network of teacher training and support provided by the high/Scope foundation. High/Scope approach is viewed by early childhood practitioners as one that implements

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many of the best practices embraced by the profession.

Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach is a form of alternative education which focuses on children through a strong sense of community. It is usually applied to young students in pre-school and primary school grades. This philosophy proposes interactive methods of teaching which often involve the parents, educators and environment in a variety of ways. This approach originates after the World War II when some of the schools in the city rejected the traditional approach of teaching children through strict discipline and its guidelines and adopted a more flexible method. Gradually, this new way gained popularity around the world because it encourages child development through exploration of interests and building relationships with others.

The Reggio Emilia approach to education is committed to the creation of conditions for learning that will enhance and facilitate children's construction of his or her own powers of thinking through the synthesis of all the expressive, communicative and cognitive languages" (Edwards and Forman, 1993). The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is a city-run and sponsored system designed for all children from birth-through six years of age. The Reggio Emilia approach can be viewed as a resource and inspiration to help educators, parents, and children as they work together to further develop their own educational programs.

The Reggio Emilia approach is based upon the following principles:

Emergent Curriculum: An emergent curriculum is one that builds upon the interests of children. Topics for study are captured from the talk of children, through community or family events as well as the known interests of children (puddles, shadow, dinosaurs, etc.); Team planning is important. Teachers formulate hypotheses about the possible directions of a project, the materials needed, parent and/or community support and involvement.

Project Work: A project is an in-depth investigation about a topic that incorporates children's questions, interests, and theories about that topic. Reggio Emilia approach believes that project can emerge from children's ideas and/or interests; can be provoked by teachers; can be introduced by teachers knowing what is of interest to children: shadows, puddles, tall buildings, construction sites, nature, etc. Projects may last one week or could continue throughout the school year. In project work, children take on significant decision-making responsibility for how the project will unfold and what steps will be utilized next. It is an adventure that helps children to explore a central pool of information through many different avenues. Projects also helps children and teachers to experience a sense of novelty as the topic changes so do props ,activities and material which reinvigorates daily routines. Long-term projects enhance lifelong learning.

Representational Development: Consistent with Howard Gardner's notion of schooling for multiple intelligences, the Reggio Emilia approach calls for the integration of the graphic arts as tools for cognitive, linguistic, and social development. Presentation of concepts and hypotheses in multiple forms of representation - print art, construction, drama, music, puppetry, and shadow play are viewed as essential to children's understanding of experience.

Collaboration: This method is valuable and necessary to advance cognitive development. Children are encouraged to dialogue, critique, compare, negotiate, hypothesize, and solve problem through group work. This promotes both a sense of group membership and the uniqueness of self. There are high emphasises on the collaboration among home-school community to support the learning of the child.

Teachers as Researchers: The teacher's role within the Reggio Emilia approach is complex. Working as co-teachers, the role of the teacher is first and foremost to be that of a learner alongside the children. The teacher is a teacher-researcher, a resource and guide as she/he lends expertise to children (Edwards, 1993). Within such a teacher-researcher role, educators carefully listen, observe, and document children's work and the growth of community in their classroom and are to provoke, co-construct, and stimulate thinking, and encourage children's collaboration with peers. Teachers are committed to reflect about their own teaching and learning.

Documentation: Pictures of children engaged in experiences; their words as they discuss what they are doing, feeling and thinking and the children's interpretation of experience through the visual media are displayed as a graphic presentation of the dynamics of learning. Documentation is used as assessment and advocacy in early years' classrooms

Environment: Environment is considered the "third teacher." Teachers carefully organize space for small and large group projects and small intimate spaces for one, two or three children. Documentation of children's work, plants, and collections that children have made from former outings are displayed both at the children's and adults' eye levels. Common space available to all children in the school includes dramatic play areas and work tables for children from different classrooms to come together. Small and colourless classrooms are thought to be unproductive and limiting to a child's imagination. Lessons are to be held in much bigger rooms with plenty of light, space and real plants. This principle is to stimulate children's sense of exploration from an early stage.

Parental Involvement: This approach places a great value on parental input and most school boards hold open meetings on issues like school curriculum and policy. Parents are strongly encouraged to assist their children, not only with homework, but also by being involved in the child's school activities. Parents are viewed as partners, collaborators and advocates for their children. The educators design the learning materials to enhance teachers' own education and to allow them learn along with their pupils. The teaching methods include learning from physical experience, such as touching, hearing or seeing. Examinations are reduced and the focus is on helping children to understand the practical ways they can use what they are learning.

Her idea about media is that children should explore first: what is this material, what does it do, before what can I do with the material. They should have variation in colour, texture, and pattern and that teachers should help children "see" the colours, tones, hues; help children "feel" the texture, the similarities and differences. In addition, colours should be presented in an artistic manner; it too should be aesthetically pleasing to look at—it should invite you to touch, admire, inspire and should be revisited throughout many projects to help children.

The Reggio teacher allows the children to ask their own questions, and generate their

own hypotheses and to test them. She allows children to explore and generate many possibilities both affirming and contradictory. She welcomes contradictions as a venue for exploring, discussing and debating. At the same time, she provides opportunity to use symbolic languages to represent thoughts and hypothesis. She provides opportunity for the children to communicate their ideas to others. Furthermore, she offers children, through the process of revisiting the opportunity to reorganize concepts, ideas, thoughts and theories to construct new building.

She is a keen observer, documenter, and partner in the learning process.

Montessori Approach

Maria Montessori's passion for her method started when she had to work with mentally retarded children and became deeply interested in their education. Her biographer, E.M. Standing, gave a striking example of how her ideas and practice of education were formed by her observation of children. Montessori watched a group of retarded children who were kept in a completely empty room, lacking any equipment for them to handle. After meals, the children searched the floor with their hands looking for crumbs. Montessori saw their behaviour as an instinctive effort to learn about the environment through their hands and this prompted her to design materials that catered for that need. The major themes in her method are the prepared environment, the spiritual preparation of the Montessori Director/Directress, Montessori Materials, sensitive periods and normalization, etc.

Montessori Prepared Environment

Maria Montessori advocated for special environment which is a living room for the children; one that is prepared and arranged for them. Characteristics of the prepared environment include: beauty, order, reality, simplicity and accessibility. This environment should be rich with a series of self-corrected materials that are displayed on open shelves at the children's eyes level. Such an environment should be prepared for each level of development and that it should be one that satisfies the particular needs of the children at each stage. It should also be an environment that the child can live his life intellectually, socially and spiritually be free from unnecessary adult intervention. She was of the opinion that "The greatness of man can only emerge if he is not suppressed by mental oppression but he is given the capacity for free development, such that his inner world will not be limited and his spirit weighed down". The personality of man must be considered in the way we educate children for it is the child of today that makes the man of tomorrow.

The preschool environment unifies the psycho-social, physical, and academic functioning of the child. Its important task is to provide students with an early and general foundation that includes a positive attitude toward school, inner security and a sense of order, pride in the physical environment, abiding curiosity, a habit of concentration, habits of initiative and persistence, the ability to make decisions, self-discipline, and a sense of responsibility to other members of the class, school, and community. This foundation will enable them to acquire more specialized knowledge and skills throughout their school career. The prepared environment offers the essential elements for optimal development. The key components comprise the children, teacher and physical surroundings including the specifically designed Montessori educational material. There are prepared environments for children at each successive developmental plane.

These environments allow children to take responsibility for their own education, giving them the opportunity to become human beings able to function independently and hence interdependently.

Montessori Materials

Montessori materials isolate different concepts and qualities. They are carefully sequenced to break down each step for the child, and make it possible for the child to feel success at each step. The materials are also graded as they progress from concrete to abstract, first appealing to the child's senses. They are manipulative, based on the fact that the child learns by 'doing'. They are designed to isolate the difficulties of the concept being learned, i.e. The Pink Tower teaches the difference in grades. Every material has control of error which is defined as any kind of indicator that tells a child whether he is achieving success or not. Furthermore, the materials are attractive. Montessori materials are designed in such a way that they are attractive to the child, and this would encourage attentiveness in the child.

The spiritual preparation of Montessori Director/tress

Maria Montessori advocated for a new breed of teachers who are totally different from the traditional teachers. The teacher in the Montessori environment is not a "teacher" but a "directress" – this name actually depicts the primary function of the teacher, which is not so much to teach but to direct a natural energy in children. Montessori laid down two important aims for the teacher; these are to bring out the potential of the child and to bring a child up to the highest possible intellectual, moral and cultural level. To be able to achieve these aims, a teacher needs to develop the *right* attitude towards the child, doing away with every bias and pre-conceived ideas about the level of the

child's development and rely solely on her own observations of the child. At the same time, she must be humble in her work, even though she's the teacher; she must have an open mind and be ready to respect the personality, knowledge and effort displayed by the child within the learning environment. In addition, he or she must have scientific approach to work by observing children and record objectively children's behaviours. Furthermore, he must be servant of all: the greatest is the servant of all – the teacher must be ready to serve the children with regards to the environment. Her duties include keeping the environment in order so that the child's needs are met and learning will go on smoothly.

Social Development: Maria Montessori introduced the idea of her social development through mixed grouping. The Montessori environment helps to develop in the child, good morals and acceptable modes of behaviour. The make-up/constitution of the class is such that the children are of mixed age group called vertical grouping. According to Maria Montessori, this is the closet arrangement to the family unit. Within a family, children are usually of different ages. Example of a mother with six children finds them easy to manage but when there are twins or if other children are brought in of the same age, things become harder. Maria Montessori was of the opinion that it is more difficult to cope with children of the same ages. "Only children (an only child) are more difficult to manage, not because they are spoilt, but because they suffer lack of companionship"(Stanley 1984).

According to Maria Montessori, the most inhuman thing one can do in life is to segregate by age because this is against the charm of social life. She believes that separating children by sex, age, and so on breaks the bonds of social life, deprives that social life of nourishment and also breeds "a host of evils". She referred to it as

artificial isolation. In the vertically classified grouping, children of different ages help each other. We see a harmony among these children that is rarely found between adult and the small child. Maria Montessori referred to this harmony as "a natural mental osmosis". (a situation where children explain things to themselves better than adults will do). In regular schools, this does not happen i.e. older ones teaching younger ones – even though those that are more intelligent can teach other, they are not allowed to do so. In the Montessori environment, love and admiration are obvious and there is a sense of true brotherhood. Envy is not known to the children because the children do not see themselves in competition with any other children especially if the child is older than they are. Children are free to give lessons to other children who do not understand particular things and thus help themselves to understand better what they have learnt. Inferiority complex has no place in the Montessori prepared environment as obtains in the traditional schools.

Teaching Method: Teacher adopts three methods of teaching the children. These are 1. Individual presentation 2.Group presentation 3.Collective presentation. Individual presentation is done with the teacher having teaching learning process with the individual child. Group presentation is done when teacher gathers children who have the same ability to present materials to them. This group ranges from 2- 5 children. Collective presentation is the teaching that is done that involves all the children in class. This method is commonly used during circle time or when the adult wants to introduce new concept.

Some of the benefits of Montessori education includes the fact that Montessori schools are generally focused on a more balanced and more spiritual approach to life; it

creates in children a sense of dignity, equips children with social skills to function effectively in their communities; teaches independence; encourages scientific exploration. In addition, Montessori education accommodates all learning styles; children master important life skill of being a self- directed learners, etc.

In the light of the obvious facts of the study, the researchers hereby recommend the following for best practice in the education of the under 5's in Nigeria.

➢ That an eclectic approach be adopted in the early years schools to teach children since no one approach is comprehensive to meet the standard of best practice. In this wise, a relevant part of the Montessori practice, a useful part of the High/Scope and important aspects of Reggio are recommended for teaching the under 5 year old children.

➢ Adequate and specialised preparation of the ECE teachers- Maria Montessori advocated for a specialized form of training for teachers of young children She admonished that this kind of preparation does not only come through studying psychology, but by purifying one's heart and making it burn with love for the child. Montessori wished that teachers might go through a course of training in domestic services to understand who the perfect servant is in their attitude to children, She is of the opinion that teachers must come to see in the soul of the child something so rich and pure, so delicate and precious that it is a privilege to be with it. The National Child Care Association (NCCA) (2007) advocates in one of its principles that high quality Early Childhood Education

requires a highly skilled and specialised workforce that is supported by on-going professional development. National Association for the Education of Young Children (2008) also supports the opinion that children benefit most when their teachers have higher levels of formal education and specialized early childhood professional preparation. Teachers who have specific preparation, knowledge and skills in child development and early childhood education are more likely to engage in warm, positive interactions with children. They are more likely to offer richer language experiences and create more high-quality learning environments.

> Hand- on learning activities-Research almost confirms that the hands build the brain for it almost certainly provide the structural template around which an ancient brain built both a new system for hand control and a new bodily domain of experience, cognition, and imaginative life. When children's hands interact with the world, they are not only actively sensing and transforming what is "out there" but are also simultaneously acting back upon their soul as its instrument, the brain. Montessori asserts that "a child's actions (hands- on- experiences) are what take him to the road of independence".

> Prepared environment-According to Maria Montessori and the environmentalist theory, they concluded that since the environment shapes the total learning and behaviour of the child, it must be prepared to unify the psycho-social, physical, and academic functioning of the child. . The

environments should allow children to take responsibility for their own education, provide nourishment; giving them the opportunity to become human beings able to function independently and interdependently.

> Parent/ community involvement-Reggio Emilia approach recommended parental input in the operation of schools. Programmes that are developmentally appropriate encourage parental involvement to scheduled events and reciprocal relationship with parents. Parents are strongly encouraged to assist their children, not only with homework, but also by being involved in the child's school activities. Parents are viewed as partners, collaborators and advocates for their children.

In conclusion, since every approach has its strengths and weaknesses, an eclectic approach to teaching is recommended in the early year's classroom in Nigeria in order to bring out the best in the child. According to Webster's unabridged English Dictionary, Eclectic is defined as made up or combining elements from a variety of sources. It is therefore fitting to say without mincing words that an eclectic practitioner is one who looks at the different approaches and methods of learning instruction and takes from each to form his/her own unique philosophy which provides the basis for a new integrated curriculum. Eclecticism is synonymous with integration and this implies that eclectism does not admit disconnected and disjointed facts; it rather makes use of connected, related facts that lead in a co-jointed manner to effective problem solving.

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