

SOWING THE SEEDS OF THE FUTURE: THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

by:

Maria Rosario Paguio Cubales
Teacher II, Cataning Integrated School

As a society, we believe that education is the key to a better future. Parents pour their blood, sweat, and tears into working rigid hours in hopes of being able to provide for their children's educational needs. Many put their children's choice of higher educational institutions above everything else. It is a prevailing concept since professionals are often judged by which university or college they graduated in. However, while this may be true, what people fail to realize is that investing in children's education does not and should not start in high school or tertiary education, but rather, during their early childhood.

A child's growth is greatly influenced by early childhood education (ECE), which also builds the groundwork for their future success. Research has consistently shown the significance of early learning experiences in various domains, including cognitive, social, emotional, and academic development. A study by Smith and Shepard (2016) showed that quality ECE programs provide a stimulating environment that promotes early literacy and numeracy skills. Children engaged in developmentally appropriate activities develop a solid foundation for future academic achievement. For instance, research by Barnett (2011) demonstrated that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs displayed better cognitive abilities, including language and problem-solving skills.

Similarly, ECE also plays a pivotal role in fostering social and emotional development. According to Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre (2012), quality early learning experiences support the development of social skills, emotional regulation, and positive

relationships. Children exposed to a nurturing and inclusive classroom environment are more likely to develop social competencies, empathy, and self-confidence. It lays the groundwork for healthy social interactions and positive relationships throughout their lives. Children who are exposed and more in tune with their own emotions are also significantly better at expressing themselves and feeling empathy towards others. Some studies even argue that learning positive traits, values, and people skills should be given priority over academics, especially during children's developmental years.

Moreover, plenty of research concluded that the early years of a child's life are critical for brain development. Neuroscientists such as Heckman and Masterov, (2007) emphasize that quality ECE experiences shape the developing brain's architecture, with profound implications for future learning and behaviour. Stimulation and enriched environments during early childhood contribute to the formation of strong neural connections, enhancing learning capacities and overall brain functioning. Education in the early years paves the way for lifelong learning. A study by Camilli et al. (2010) found that participation in quality preschool programs positively influenced educational attainment, including higher high school graduation rates and increased college enrolment. Furthermore, ECE fosters a love for learning, curiosity, and critical thinking skills, all of which are essential for future academic and career success.

The importance of early childhood education is attested and emphasized by its long-term benefits, impact on brain development, and the role it plays in fostering lifelong learning skills. By supporting brain development, fostering social and emotional skills, and cultivating a love for learning, quality ECE programs empower children to reach their full potential. As a society, we must prioritize and invest in early childhood education to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive. It is our responsibility to provide the younger generation with the means and resources to be able to gain the necessary skills, knowledge, and learning that will enable them to be globally competitive and competent.

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