

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

As Nigeria has pledged its commitment to the world declaration for Education for All (EFA) vis-à-vis the inclusion and expansion of Early childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This paper examines the rationale for ECCE in a developing nation like ours, the prospects and challenges of ECCE and offers recommendations that could make pre-school level of education more realistic in the nation in the interest of the children.

Introduction

It is an unarguable fact that early years experiences in the life of a child have a significant influence on the later life of any child. This implies that, as a country we must consider the quality of ECCE serious. Bush (2001) stated that the years between birth and age five are the foundation upon which successful (or otherwise) lives are built. At the global level, this fact is recognized and every nation is working assiduously towards providing quality early years education and care for the very youngest children. Nigeria, in accordance with the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (EFA) in Thailand in 1990, signed up in order to provide quality and comprehensive early childhood education and care for all preschoolers. Nigeria had early childhood centers prior to this but it was left to the private sector, which either provided sub-standard services or charged very high fees, thereby making this educational provision inaccessible to every child. The Federal Government of Nigeria is now responsive to early childhood education by virtue of its inclusion in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programs and even moved a step further to inaugurating early childhood education policy on 8 October 2007 (*Punch*, 9 October 2007, p. 16). This constitutes a step in the right direction in the provision of good early childhood education. Meanwhile, Anuna & Obi (2006) advance the following reasons for the introduction of ECCE in Nigeria:

- i. **Intellectual Development of the Child:** The pre-primary school falls under the pre-operational stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development which categorizes the intellectual development at this stage from 3-5 years since children are merely able to develop and form mental pictures of things and use symbols or representations of the world in which they live. According to Anuna & Obi (2006) Piaget establishes in his theory that the first five years of a child's life are crucial as they form foundation for later adult life. Since this period is characterized by accelerate of intellectual development, this can be linked to the child's social, emotional and physical development. The Ecce before serves as engine room for intellectual progress and opportunities missed at this stage are secondly reclaimed.
- ii. **Socialization of the Child:** Socialization can be seen in this context as the process of conforming to societal standards, customs, values and culture for smooth integration into the larger society. In early Childhood Education Centers, children with varying background attend the school together. In the school the learns societal customs, values and culture. Children learn to interact through playing, become law abiding and tolerated as well as learn to tolerate others.
- iii. **Emotional Development of the Child:** Emotional development of the child is the most difficult aspect of the child's life to be understood by adults. From the date of birth to the day the child enters school, the child is emotionally attached to the parents particularly the mother. It is obvious that parting from loved ones is usually painful and this has been one of the causes of truancy in schools. Pre-primary school therefore provides opportunity for children to leave their home without much emotional upset when they enter primary school. This is possible because the ECCE centers are full of other children that the child enjoys emotional attachment and upset associated with leaving loved ones at home.

- iv. **Moral Development of the Child:** Norms of the society are made for the maintenance of peace and harmony in the society. Serious deviation from known norms of a given society leads to immorality. Morality which sustains a given society comes as a result of respecting the societal norms and mores. Moral education should therefore start from early childhood education level and not at the adult stage when many anti-social and immoral behavior patterns are formed.
- v. **Physical Development of the Child:** The physical development of the child is of two dimensions that is the development of gross motor skills through throwing, running and jumping activities and the development of fine motor skills through handling of small objects, toys, tying of shoes, drawing etc. Children of pre-primary school age like to be involved in one activity or the other. The average child's home may not always meet the physical needs of the child to be engaged in activities at least as much as they would like. They like to jump, cross dwarf walls, form groups and walk across buildings, play with balls, play with swings and manipulate with old tyres and bicycles. The pre-primary school provides opportunities for the child to acquire these skills and help them to develop physically.

In a nutshell, the rationale for the provision of ECCE is to ensure the overall development of the child who is endowed with nascent potentials who is to be nurtured properly right from the cradle for him/her to be nurtured meaningfully to maturity.

Yet, some pertinent issues need to be examined if the goals of this system is to provide the best possible education for all Nigerian children. This article therefore addresses the problems and the prospects that may be envisaged in the implementation of a program so that necessary actions can be taken in the right direction, and Nigerian early childhood education and care programs can meet the standards of global quality requirements. So, for this educational level to be a reality in Nigeria, the following aspects need to be considered and the creation of new policies must be given serious consideration.

The National Policy on Early Childhood Education

The *National Policy on Education* (FRN, 2004) regards the ECCE as pre-primary form of education and outlines its objectives as:

- Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school
- Preparing the child for the primary level of education
- Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work
- Creating individuals who are responsible citizens
- Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities etc
- Teaching cooperation and team spirit
- Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colors, shapes forms, etc., through play
- Teaching of good habits, especially good health habits.

The achievement of the stated objectives of ECCE in Nigeria is brought about via the following means:

- establishing pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encouraging both community and private efforts in the provision of early childhood education;
- making provision in teacher education programs for specialization in early childhood education;
- ensuring that the medium of instruction will principally be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end: (i) developing the orthography for many more Nigerian languages; and (ii) producing textbooks in Nigerian languages;
- ensuring that the main method of teaching in the childhood education centers will be through play, and that the curriculum of teacher education is appropriately oriented to achieve this;
- regulating and controlling the operation of early childhood education – to this end, the teacher-pupil ratio is set at 1:25;
- setting and monitoring a minimum standard for early childcare centers in the country; and

- ensuring full participation of government, communities and teachers' associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities (FRN, 2004).

The contents of the policy are detailed and planned because it is the stated goal of the Nigerian government that its education system should be comparable to all others in the world. However, some questions remain. For example:

- (i) What action has been taken in order for the goals of the new policy to be realized?
- (ii) What is the content of the newly inaugurated policy and how is it quite different from the existing one?

Teacher Factor

In paragraphs 23 to 27 of the UBE implementation guidelines, it is clearly stated that 'no educational system can rise above the level of its teachers', identifying the fact that laudable educational initiatives have collapsed previously simply because the 'teacher factor' was not taken seriously. This is the reason for the government's pronouncement that to ensure the success of UBE, teachers' issues would be taken into consideration, especially in the area of raising the level of teachers' general education. Currently the National Teachers Institute (NTI) programs (Grade II as well as NCE) and the teeming population of students in most Nigerian Colleges of Education studying Primary Education Studies (PES) are not trained for early child education contexts. The training these students receive makes them adequate for primary schooling only. The fact that the students are exposed to some child psychology courses is far from sufficient to regard them as early childhood educators/teachers.

Looking at the numerous universities in the country, it is apparent that only few of the institutions run early childhood education as a discipline at an undergraduate level and at postgraduate level, or on a part-time basis. It is also observed that even where the course is offered there is relatively low number of students enrollment. The implications are as follows:

1. Though many teachers are said to be produced through the NTI programs (Grade II and NCE), regular NCE, and even Pivotal Teacher Training Programs (PTTP), which are mainly organized for the take-off of the UBE scheme, there are no qualified teachers on the ground to work in the early childhood care education centers in schools. So far this has occurred in both the public and private sectors.
2. The percentage of institutions offering the course and the number of students taking up the course cannot satisfy the demand from the teeming population of over 12.73 million preschoolers in Nigeria (Basic Education Statistics & Trends in Nigeria, 1998). Therefore, for the remediation of the problem at hand, it is advisable that the available Grade II and NCE teachers be given on-the-job training on a regular basis to keep them current in the current educational program that will adequately benefit these preschoolers.

Teacher: Pupil Ratio Syndrome

The teacher: pupil ratio of 1:25 with a helper/an assistant stated in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) for the pre-primary class is likely to be a problem in the sense that the developmental characteristics and the needs of the preschoolers have not been considered. The children at this level are so restless, extremely active and full of energy to expend. They are still dependent on adults for almost all their basic needs – physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social skills – and therefore they require their full attention and diverse activities to help to satisfy their basic needs. It is not yet clear how smaller class sizes influence the quality of teaching in such centers. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2002) condemned a similar practice in Ireland and stated that such a practice is unfavorable to child initiatives or to individual attention being given to the children (even on the part of the teacher, it would be frustrating and extremely difficult to achieve any worthwhile work). Tassoni et al (2005) then suggested a ratio of 1:4 for age three and a ratio 1:8 for ages four to six as providing opportunities for adequate individual attention to every child in the class and, hence, aiding optimal development of the children. If the ratio is not feasible in Nigeria it would probably be the result of a shortage of manpower. The highest ratio for this level ought not to exceed 1:15 with one assistant or 1:25 with two assistants.

Minimum Standards

FRN (2004) indicates that the government will set minimum standards for early child care centers in the country, which means that there will be a benchmark for all to follow in the operation of these educational centers in the nation. This should be a welcome idea, in that it will be a way to curb the nonchalant attitudes of many school proprietors who are much more interested in the monetary gains from the early childhood education business rather than in the provision of high-quality education for Nigerian children. To set a standard for any educational program, it is important to consider what these standards look like. They are the universally accepted variables to determine quality (World Education Forum, 2000). Obanya (2000) refers to them as a tripartite model of quality dimension. That is, they will be the yardstick to measure whether the service provided is either adequate or below standard. As analyzed by the World Education Forum (2000), and cited by Aladejana & Adelodun (2003), a reflection upon standards involves considering input such as the building and other physical facilities provided in early childhood education centers; process factors have to do with curriculum process, implementation and reform, while output refers to the development status and learning of children. Obanya (2000) expanded the inherent variables as follows: inputs incorporate responsive policy, responsive curriculum, the teacher factor, teaching-learning materials, infrastructure, pedagogical space and funds; processes, according to Obanya (2000), include school-level management, effective teacher-learner interaction, professional teacher support, monitoring and evaluation, and emphasis on learner's success not only the mastery of subject matter. In terms of outcomes, he identified people who have learnt how to learn (which might mean being well educated), socially responsive citizens (that is, being beneficial to their society), and a self-regenerating educational system. It is evident that these issues have been identified and recognized by the government, and they are incorporated into the policy. However, it would be pertinent to say right away that this issue of minimum standard should not just be on paper, but rather that action should be set in motion to determine what the level of expectation is for the standard at the three levels identified. Also, experts in the field of early years' education and other related fields should be vested with the responsibility of setting the standard and monitoring the compliance both in the government and in privately owned centers.

Language of Instruction

In the National Policy of Education, it has been stipulated that even at early childhood education level, the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment should be used as a language of instruction. Parents have not been favorably disposed to this issue, since they seem to believe that the ability to communicate fluently in English is one of the reasons why parents send their children to nursery schools. It has been established by scholars that education in the mother tongue is more effective and relevant to the needs of young children. Globally, it is posited that initial education in the mother tongue facilitates second- or foreign-language learning (Obemeata, 1985). Afolayan (1970) also said that the more accurate a child's knowledge is of his/her own language, the more efficient and adequate his/her translation to English (as a second language) will be. This was made apparent in the Ife Six-Year Primary Project. It showed positive results for teaching in the mother tongue with a later effective transition to English. This study could be used to enlighten parents on the impact of mother tongue on learning. One problem associated with teaching in the mother tongue is that there are not sufficient books for children at this level to interact with. The majority of those available are foreign-based and expensive, making them unaffordable and not readily available to these children. The few home-based books that are available are of low quality, making them unappealing and unattractive to read. There are virtually no reading materials for this age range in the children's indigenous languages (Ajayi, 2007). It then becomes a great challenge to the government sector charged with the responsibility of book production, scholars and educators in the area of children's literature to wake up to their responsibility so that the Nigerian child might have an enabling environment to interact with in these formative years.

Funding of ECCE

To achieve success in any public service, the issue of finance/funding cannot be overlooked. If education is poorly funded, it will affect the staffing, pupil:teacher ratio, the provision of infrastructure and the like, which would have a grave effect on what is likely to be the quality of the

output. This is the reason many developed nations make provision for the funding of the services for their pre-schoolers. The funding of this segment is given a prime place in the nations' budget. In view of the international consensus that that 'no nation can be said to be serious if she does not place the required emphasis on comprehensive childhood care and education'. In light of this, now that Nigeria is committed to early childhood care and socialization, it can learn from other nations that support 'education, the right of every child'. It requires the government to make realistic budgets for this educational sector. At the same time, there should be a proper monitoring and coordination of the disbursement of the funds earmarked for the sector so that every child is truly taken care of.

Supervision of ECCE

The issue of supervision is vital in the process of implementing early childhood care education in Nigeria if success is to be attained. There is the need to point out that laudable programs with adequate facilities will eventually crumble if there is no supervision. Nwagbara (2003) and Ogunsaju (2006) have identified supervision as an indispensable management key of any organization or organizational program. This then means that supervision should of necessity be an integral part of early childhood education programs so that the goal(s) may be achieved. Supervision needs to be tailored towards constructive criticism and guidance so as to develop a sense of confidence and competence in teachers, thereby leading to improvement. In this way, regular and appropriate supervision in early childhood care education will help in evaluating the program as well as in decision-making processes.

Conclusion and Recommendation

It is a worthwhile step in the right direction for the Nigerian government to have agreed to have full participation in the education of preschoolers. All Nigerian children deserve the best, and education is the only legacy that can be given to set them on the road to optimal development. To ensure that ECCE is successfully implemented in Nigeria the issues raised in the *National Policy on Education* relating to teacher factor, minimum standards, language policy amongst others must be addressed. This means that all hands must be at stake as a matter of urgency.

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