

# EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: A VIABLE TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

The paper has examined Early Childhood Care and Education: A Viable tools for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria. The paper also looks at theoretical framework of Constructivist Learning Theory, Democracy in the early childhood field, the paper also look at the level of participation such as national level local level, Conditions for democracy in Early Childhood Care and Education, Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-making, conclusion and has some suggestions to promote early child care and education such as government should make a legal framework for early child education and care, children should be involved from the earliest possible stage of any initiative, participation should be voluntary and children should be allowed to leave at any stage, all children should be treated with equal respect regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other factors, children are entitled to respect for their views and experience, power relations and decision-making structures must be transparent and ground rules should be established with all the children at the beginning

**Key Words:** Early Childhood, Care, Education, Viable tools, and Sustainable Democracy

## **Introduction**

Education is generally says to the bedrock of peace and development of any nation. Education cannot be achieved without peace and peace cannot be achieved without education. Peace stretched its existence from all ages, the ages of old stone, middle to the present. Invariably, peace is paramount and indispensable. And it cannot achieve its desirable ends if not processed by veritable agents. Remarkably too, the traditional domain of peace is society, having commendatory wet-net, attractive to even those that may oppose its functionality, the essence being to build peaceful, united and strong relational bond. Convincingly, the wheels of peace are education, involving socialization. Expediently, there is nothing to substitute peace with, and peace herald's socio-economic development of a society (Nateinyin and Toinpre, 2016).

The recognition of education as a right of every child is a global charter derivable from the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, Eheazu (1998:6) in Okorosaye-Orubite (2008) opined that: "everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally accessible to all on the basis of merit." Having recognised this fact and whatever the posture of education before this charter in different countries of the world, provision of education to the citizenry has come to overtake the lethargy and lackadaisical notion or attitude of parents or States or nation about educating their people.

There was a strong consensus that educating for sustainability should begin very early in life. It is in the early childhood period that children develop their basic values, attitudes, skills, behaviours and habits, which may be long lasting. Studies have shown that racial stereotypes are learned early and that childhood is able to pick up cultural messages about wealth and inequality. As early childhood education is about laying a sound intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and physical foundation for development and lifelong learning, it has an enormous potential in fostering values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that support sustainable development e.g. wise use of resources, cultural diversity, gender equality and democracy (Lloyd 2020).

Democracy has nearly become a household name in Nigeria but it is very clear that our understanding of the concept is very superficial. Democracy is rule by consent- the people's choice. This is why according to Ogunkunle as cited by the United State Institute of Peace USIP (2019), a military government, no matter its attractiveness and accomplishment cannot be a democracy. He opined further that a civilian government cannot assert to be a democracy unless it is produced and emerged truly as the choice of the people. Unarguably, the most fundamental precept of democracy according to Oluwagbohunmi (2017) is the freedom of citizens to elect their leaders. He noted that when this is denied, any nation that truly aspires to practice democracy must as a matter of urgency, revisit its value system to make sure that it is in line with the dictates of democracy. In other words, without these value system and conditions, the dream of free and fair elections will remain a mirage. A nation that is multi-lingual and multi- ethnic like Nigeria must be anxious with evolving a stable political system that could help in solving the fundamental problems of nation building. But after five decades of independence, political stability has proved obscure largely because of our inability to operate successfully constitutional and democratic government that could enhance the realization national growth and development. Thus, the need to tackle the nation's degrading value system via the school; hence the imperative of Social Studies education as a conduit. However, the importance of the school system in general and an organised curriculum like Social Studies in the political system is the only agent of socialization that can systematize its programme purposely to work in line with the objective of the existing political system. The teaching of democratic

Democratic stability in a polity is achieved through collective national consciousness and determined efforts of citizens to eschew undue inclination to ethnicity, parochial sentiments and mediocrity in the match towards achieving sustainable nation building. Nation building is a complex issue in a multi-ethnic society as Nigeria. Ethnic attachment and inclination is ingrained in Africa's cultural values. Against this background, Ezedike (2009) remarked "...some aspects of (our) culture that do not synchronize with the speed of human development, need to be adjusted for our own good". The modern age calls for restructuring of retrogressive values towards objectivity, justice, transparency, resourcefulness and patriotism as sustainable behaviour for building a democratic nation.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper has built its theoretical framework on Constructivist Learning Theory. The Constructivist Learning Theory provides a sound theoretical framework for this study. The theory explains how learners construct individually or socially constructed meanings in the process of learning (Hein, 1991). In other words, learners construct knowledge through their interaction or exposure to learning situations in the world around them including their families, friends, media and libraries. This enriches and expands the knowledge base of learners as knowledge is acquired through every act of social interaction. Constructivist learning theory is associated with behavioural and cognitive theorists such as Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, John Dewey and Jerome Bruner (Lutz and Huitt, 2004).

The constructivist learning theory has broad applications, especially in the education field. For example, Semerci and Batdi (2015: 176) applied the constructive learning theory in a comprehensive meta-analysis and concluded that the application of constructivist learning theory

influenced learners' positive academic achievement, retention level and attitude scores. Kenny and Wirth (2009: 36) also stated that interactive teaching and learning methods such as role play and interviews greatly influence constructivism, creating a non-threatening situation relevant for academic success. This study adopted the constructivist learning theory to investigate the relationship between the uses of the school library resources and teaching and learning in the basic schools; which is the aim of the study. From a constructivist perspective, (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

### **Democracy in the early childhood field**

A vision of education that takes democracy seriously is not confined to later stages of education. It can, as the Swedish preschool curriculum states, be the basis of early childhood services (Skolverket. Stockholm, Sweden and Skolverket, 2018) As George argues: Democracy and day nursery are two terms that are not immediately associated with each other. The basis for a democratic everyday culture can indeed already be formed in the day nursery (George, 2009) Democracy in early childhood education and care (ECEC) can operate at several levels: not just the institutional that is, in the nursery or preschool, but also at national and more local levels. Each level has responsibility for certain choices, using "choice" to mean the democratic process of collective decision-making for the common good (to reclaim it from the neo-liberal usage of "choice" as decision-making by individual consumers. (Power Inquiry, 2006 and Bentley, 2005). Democracy can be fostered and practiced at one level alone, but for greatest effect, all three should be engaged: each level should complement the operation of democracy at other levels. A democratic system also involves each level leaving space for democratic practice at other levels, with strong decentralisation from national to more local levels (Power Inquiry, 2006).

### **National level**

The task at national level is to provide a national framework of entitlements, expectations and values that express democratically agreed national entitlements, goals and values, including democracy as a fundamental value; to ensure the material conditions to make these a reality; and to enable other levels to implement them in a democratic way. To take some examples: a democratic framework might include an entitlement to services for children as citizens, together with a funding system that enables all children to exercise their entitlement; a clear statement that early childhood services are a public good and responsibility, not a private commodity; a framework curriculum that defines broad values and goals, including democracy as a fundamental value, but allows local interpretation; a fully integrated early childhood policy, the responsibility of one government department; and a well educated, well paid and diverse workforce for all young children (Bentley, 2005).

### **Local levels**

What does democratic practice in ECEC mean at more local levels of government? It may mean developing a "local cultural project of childhood." (Fortunati, 2006) This term captures the idea of political commitment, citizen participation and collective decision-making to enable a community to take responsibility for its children and their education (understood in the broad sense), responsibility not just for providing services but for answering critical pedagogical questions: What is our image of the child, the educator and the early childhood centre? What do we understand by knowledge and learning? What are our fundamental educational values? It is common to communes have undertaken such collective, democratic ventures and, no doubt, there are examples in other countries. It also means actively supporting the implementation of democracy in local early childhood services.

Bringing democratic politics into the nursery or the crèche, preschool, kindergarten, nursery school or any of the other terms we use to describe ECEC services means citizens, both children and adults, engaging in at least five types of activity:

1. Decision-making about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery, addressing Dewey's principle that "all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them." This is closest to the idea of democracy as a principle of government, in which either elected representatives or all members of the group have some involvement in decision-making in specified areas. Examples might be nurseries run as cooperatives by a staff or parent group, or elected boards of parents, staff and other citizens involved in pedagogical, budgetary and staffing issues. But apart from formal governing bodies, children and adults should also be involved in decision making about everyday or major matters (Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado, 2008 and Hansen, (2002)
2. Understandings of learning. Democratic practice goes beyond seeing learning solely as reproducing pre-determined content and skills, but views children as "active constructors of their own learning and producers of original points of view concerning the world."20,21 Pedagogies of "invention" or "listening," open to unpredicted outcomes and new thought and valuing wonder and surprise, are necessarily inscribed with democratic values and practices.
3. The evaluation of early childhood work through participatory methods. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence contrast "quality" as a technical language of evaluation with the more democratic language of "meaning making." The "language of quality" involves a supposedly objective observer applying externally determined norms to an institution in order to make a decontextualized assessment of conformity to these norms. By contrast, the "language of meaning making" speaks of evaluation as a formative, democratic process of interpretation, involving all stakeholders (including children), and making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and change. Such an approach is embodied in the practice of pedagogical documentation, with its potential not only for evaluation, but also for participatory research, professional development, planning and democratic practice.
4. Contesting dominant discourses, what Foucault terms "regimes of truth," which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with authority and power. These regimes of truth are backed by privileged groups often the State and its expert gate-keepers who claim a privileged position of objectivity and knowledge. Contesting these powerful discourses means striving to make core assumptions and values visible and "welcoming and affirming 'thinking-otherwise'".
5. It is through contesting dominant discourses that the fifth democratic political activity can emerge: opening up for change by developing a critical approach to what exists and envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action. Giroux speaks of "critical democracy," through which people can "produce the conditions of their own agency through dialogue, community participation, resistance and political struggle" ( Ahlberg , Moss and Pence, 2013).

### **Conditions for democracy in Early Childhood Care and Education**

For a democratic early childhood care and education to evolve and be sustained requires attention to creating enabling conditions, for example adopting an understanding that early childhood services offer an ideal space for democratic practice. This space, so understood, offers opportunities for all citizens to participate be they children or parents, practitioners or politicians, or indeed any other local citizen.

This idea of participation, therefore, defines the early childhood centre as a social and political place and thus as an educational place in the fullest sense. However, this is not a given, so to speak, it is not a natural, intrinsic part of being a school. It is a philosophical choice, a choice based on values.<sup>26</sup> This choice is of a particular image of the early childhood service: not as a business selling commodities on the market, not as a factory applying technologies to children to

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produce predetermined outcomes, but as a public forum in civic society, a place of encounter for citizens of all ages (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2004).

Other understandings are also important, for example the image of the child, parent and worker.

From a democratic perspective, the child is understood as a competent citizen, an expert in her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to and having the right and competence to participate in collective decision-making. Parents are seen as competent citizens “because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas...which are the fruits of their experience as parents and citizens.” Workers assume what Oberhuemer<sup>27</sup> has termed “democratic professionalism,” understanding their role as practitioners of democracy. While recognizing that they bring an important perspective and a relevant local knowledge to the democratic forum, they are also aware that they do not have the truth nor privileged access to knowledge.

Implementing democracy also needs to be supported by what has been called a ‘competent system’, which is a system of “reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context [that provides] support for individuals to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that respond to the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts”.

Born out of the struggle for freedom from dictatorship, inspired by Freinet’s democratic and cooperative pedagogy and today recognised by national government, the organisation supports teachers from all levels of education through national, regional and local activities that connect teachers’ pedagogical practice with opportunities for professional development through dialogue and reflection and that promote democracy.

These examples point to one other key condition: the nurturing of democratic practice in early childhood institutions needs certain material conditions. Examples include: adequate and stable public funding; a well-qualified workforce educated to be democratic professionals; and appropriate pedagogical tools, such as pedagogical documentation (Moss and Abingdon, 2014).

### **Promoting Children’s Participation in Democratic Decision-making**

In this Innocenti Insight, Gerison Lansdown examines the meaning of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that children are entitled to participate in the decisions that affect them. Lansdown takes a close look at the full meaning of this Article as a tool that can help children themselves to challenge abuses of their rights and take action to defend those rights. She also stresses what the Article does not do. It does not, for example, give children the right to ride roughshod over the rights of others particularly parents. The Insight makes a strong case for listening to children, outlining the implications of failing to do so and challenging many of the arguments that have been levelled against child participation. It is, above all, a practical guide to this issue, with clear checklists for child participation in conferences and many concrete examples of recent initiatives.

### **Conclusions**

Democratic practice in ECEC means the adoption and enactment of democracy as a fundamental value. Its success is likely to be associated with certain other values being shared among the community of the early childhood institution, for example: A commitment to cooperation and solidarity, dialogue and listening; Respect for diversity, which relates to the ethics of an encounter, a relational ethics in their discussion of ethics in early childhood education; Recognition of multiple perspectives and diverse paradigms,<sup>33</sup> acknowledging that there is more than one answer to most questions and that there are many ways of viewing and understanding the world; Welcoming curiosity, uncertainty and subjectivity and the responsibility that they require of us; Developing a capacity for critical thinking, which in the words of Nikolas Rose is “a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural,

unquestionable: to stand against the maxims of one's time, against the spirit of one's age, against the current of received wisdom...[it is a matter] of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter."

The importance of such values for fostering democratic practice is captured in these words by the three pedagogistas from Reggio Emilia already quoted, on the subject of participation in their municipal schools: Participation is based on the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with those of others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts: and in our opinion, so, too, is democracy itself.

### **Suggestions**

- The followings suggestions can be made to promote early child care and education
1. Government should make a legal framework for Early Child Education and Care.
  2. Children should be involved from the earliest possible stage of any initiative.
  3. Participation should be voluntary and children should be allowed to leave at any stage.
  4. All children should be treated with equal respect regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other factors.
  5. Children are entitled to respect for their views and experience.
  6. Power relations and decision-making structures must be transparent.
  7. Ground rules should be established with all the children at the beginning

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