
Enhancing the Early Childhood Education for National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The place of early childhood education in the Nigerian educational system cannot be over-emphasized. The young children from about the age of 3 are exposed to teaching and learning through play-like activities in a group setting for mental, social and physical learning suited to their developmental age until the mandatory age of government approved formal schooling. For any meaningful educational transformation in Nigeria, the development of early childhood or pre-school education must find its proper footing at the foundation level of our educational system. This paper explains what early childhood education entails and also its importance. Accordingly, the paper highlights the problems of early childhood education and the way forward for national development in Nigeria.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) sometimes called Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the education that children obtain during early stages of their childhood. In other words, it is the formal teaching of young children by people outside the family or in settings outside the home. This type of education is given to children usually before the age of normal schooling i.e. six (6) years in most nations like Nigeria. (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001).

Formal education is seen as a means through which many problems of the society can be solved. For this reason, education is considered in many societies as a very important tool through which development and growth can be achieved. It is as a result of this fact that each society evolves an educational system that will be able to translate its aspirations into reality. For the reality of aspirations to be achieved, all the stages of education in every given society must be well laid out in such a way that each stage or segment has specific objectives that must have to be achieved. (Indyar, 1998:1).

This paper seeks to examine the importance of enhancing early childhood education for national development in Nigeria. The paper is divided into Six Sections, namely: Introduction, Importance of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria, Problems Affecting Early Childhood Education in Nigeria, The Way Forward to Enhance Early Childhood Education in Nigeria and Conclusions. The rest of the paper focuses on the place of Early Childhood Education in the National Policy on Education (NPE).

Importance of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

According to the National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004:6) the purpose of pre-primary education shall be to:

- (a) Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- (b) Prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- (c) Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, etc);
- (d) Inculcate social norms;
- (e) Inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, and environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc;
- (f) Develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit;
- (g) Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
- (h) Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play.

Considering the purpose of Pre-Primary Education above, it won't be wrong to say that Early Childhood Education is the key element that helps in building a good foundation for child's educational success. Every child learns habit and form patterns that are not simply changed in later years. If parents and educators can develop productive early education patterns for the youngsters in their charge, those kids will be on their way to achieving great educational success.

(Bowman, Donovan, and Burns, 2001) says, Early childhood is a crucial time period for the development of the mental functions of children. This development, including the emergence of the abilities and skills in areas such as language, motor skills, psychosocial cognitive and learning, is now known to be greatly influenced by exogenous factors, including the nature of the educational environment to which the child is exposed during the first 6 - 8 years of life.

Early experiences that are nurturing and active actually thicken the cortex of an infant's brain, creating a brain with more extensive and sophisticated neuron structures that later determine intelligence and behaviour. It also means that children who are exposed to more language and more caring interaction with adults have an advantage over their peers that grow up in stressful environments or have unresponsive caregivers. (Eva Essa, 1999).

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Early childhood education help the children to build the social and emotional skills they need to succeed in school. Teachers expect children to be able to follow directions, start and finish projects, and know when they need to ask for help. Such “soft” skills are just as important as cognitive or “hard” skills – like being able to count, recite the alphabet, and write their names.

If a child can not follow directions, he or she will have difficulty attending to the task of learning. Young children build these social-emotional skills through responsive relationships with parents and teachers. When children trust their caregivers to respond consistently to their needs, they learn to regulate their emotions and behaviour. Strong social-emotional skills are the foundation of lifelong learning which in future years, help students succeed in school. It also increases childhood literacy and high school graduation rates, not to mention reducing crime and teenage pregnancy.

Early childhood programmes not only improve the lives of the children and families involved but also result in substantial economic benefits for the society. Although early intervention programmes are expensive, but there is continuing need to promote a common concern for the welfare of all children. They benefit from experiences that they may not receive at home, for instance, participating in group activities, playing with a group of age-mates, or learning specific concepts from specially trained teachers. Parents can not afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can they wait until they reach school age – a time when it may be too late to intervene. Learning is a dynamic process and is most effective when it begins at a young age and continues through to adulthood. (Heckman 2000:50).

Since early childhood level of education is one upon which others build, it is the key to the success or failure of the entire educational system. The implication of this statement is that if the early childhood education which is the foundation is not laid properly, it is more likely that the remaining or subsequent levels will be shaky and unbalanced. Like a building, the superstructure can not be stronger than its foundation. In other words, any education system that overlooks the significance of foundation education at the early school level and concentrates on the levels beyond the pre-primary is like ignoring the foundation of a building and over-emphasising the superstructure. The inherent danger created by this type of situation is that the products of the early childhood education system would not be educationally well equipped with the skills and knowledge required at the levels beyond the pre-primary, and consequently, only very few determined ones may move upwards (within their educational competencies) to fill the vacancies in the primary and post primary school system. (Akpoo,1992).

It is in pre-schools that most striking changes in behaviours are linked to the child’s growing sense of his/her own identity and increasing independence. The child

delights in the mastering of new skills and enjoys exploring the world outside his/her home. It is during this time that the child develops autonomy, learns to choose and decides to accept the consequences of choice. (Erickson in Kariuki, 2007). He also reckoned that one of the most frequent reasons why families send children to pre-school is for them to learn to get along well with others and teachers agree with parents that this is indeed, a very important kind of competence to acquire. The focus of the teacher therefore, must be geared towards helping the children acquire the ability to function successfully as part of a group, restrain their social impulses, obtain what they want in socially acceptable ways and find satisfaction in helping each other as they help their group as a whole.

Problems Affecting Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Pre-primary Education according to the National Policy on Education (2004) is “that education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 – 5 years plus, prior to their entering the primary school”. This type of education is relatively new and has not quite won popularity in many sections of the society. Unlike the primary level which most people in the country (Nigeria) are gradually becoming aware of its importance, pre-primary education has since its inception, been limited to a particular class in society. The following are some reasons why this level of education has remained relatively unpopular as well as some problems affecting it:

- 1 Some parents of immigrants don’t know about existing pre-primary education opportunities for their children. Many immigrant parents don’t speak English or know what early education is. They also don’t know if they are eligible for pre-primary education programmes and aren’t aware that there are benefits for early education.
- 2 The fees charged at this level of education are usually too high. This makes low income parents unable to pay the bills and consequently, don’t have the means to create a stimulating learning environment for their young children. The thought of maintaining children in such schools would hardly arise, because, a greater number of our citizens who can not feed themselves adequately, feel that the net profit of attending such schools is nothing of worth. This means that people have come to look at investment in education only in terms of expected monetary profit that may result after completion. To such individuals, pre-primary education is a luxury and even some wealthy individuals who send their children to these schools do so because of the prestige it attracts. This high level of fees keep many of the Nigerian citizens away from benefiting from whatever blessings this level of education stands to offer an individual and the society in general.
- 3 Individuals who own such schools usually have the motive of making profit only. A huge amount of money is charged for variety of uniforms by school owners, and low quality school uniforms are supplied to pupils. Since the

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driving force behind the running of pre-primary schools is profit, the establishment of these schools has become a feature of urban areas where there is the sure supply of children from affluent homes. This becomes difficult for many people and even certain wealthy individuals who live in the rural areas to send their children to such schools since they are not located in their area.

- 4 Teaching at the pre-primary level is obviously a more demanding task than at any other level. Teachers at this level require very special type of training to adequately cope with the demands of teaching. Lack of qualified teachers is peculiar to every level of education in Nigeria but this problem is more prominent at this level where there have been very limited schools that prepare teachers for them. This has resulted to lack of qualified teachers at the pre-primary level of education in the country. In consequence, what obtains now is the recruitment of individuals with almost no teaching experience to handle children that require a most thorough understanding of almost every aspect of educational theory and practice.

Conclusion

A case of enhancing early childhood education for national development in Nigeria has been presented and discussed in this paper. The paper underscores the place of Early Childhood Education and its importance in the Nigerian education system, and also firmly establishes that, early experiences have a profound impact on the development of children's brains and the cognitive, social, emotional and physical foundations of their lives. The paper also points out salient problems that this level of education faces in the national life of the country, Nigeria. Recommendations are made on the bases of the identified problems.

Pre-primary education in Nigeria has come to stay. There is also enough evidence to support the fact that pre-primary education in Nigeria needs to be strengthened for national development.

The Way Forward To Enhance Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

To enhance means to cause (something) to grow large, fuller or to be more mature or more organized. Enhancement may thus be viewed as an increase or improvement in the desired direction be it human/material resources, an economy, etc. (Akpoo, 1992).

Despite the problems affecting early childhood education, one cannot ignore this level of education and its contributions to national development in Nigeria. The objectives are laudable and if this level of education is meant to build a good foundation for child's educational success, and if the nation (Nigeria) wants her future citizens to acquire educational skills for efficient national development, then, the following recommendations must be considered to enhance the system:

- (a) The cost has to be considerably reduced. The fees charged at this level of education are usually too high and it should be considerably reduced so that Nigerians will benefit from whatever blessings this level of education stands to offer an individual and the society in general.
- (b) Government should establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community/private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.
- (c) Government has to take a more active role in the running of these schools and such schools should also be built in rural areas and it should be in a physical space that is safe.
- (d) The schools should be built in a good learning environment effective, well-thought out curriculum. Also it should begin at an appropriate age.
- (e) It should be given by professional care givers, attentive to the individualized needs and progress of the child and if possible, should also involve the parents, because, learning process starts from home and then moved to the school and its responsibility also lies upon the parents who are at home and the teachers who teach them in school.
- (f) Government should intervene and help improve early child education through the education of teachers and caregivers with specialization in early childhood education so that, they will be well qualified in their discipline.

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