
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper “Early childhood Education and Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria” explores the concept of early childhood education as the right of children. The paper exerts the argument that not just education, but early education sets a child on sound footing that makes him/her completely equipped for professionalism that translates to competence, thereby leading to personal and societal development. The paper also expounds the explanation of development goals and sustainability of same and its link with early childhood education. The importance of early childhood education as well as challenges in achieving early childhood education in Nigeria were highlighted. The theory of critical constructivism was utilized in the paper for enhanced understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. It suggests a way forward of the Nigerian situation as well as concludes and recommends among others that early childhood education is the right of every child which must be recognized by parents, government at all levels as well as other stakeholders in Nigeria educational system. It further recommends development of appropriate curriculum and the need for government to provide resources for the implementation of ECE in Nigeria.

Early childhood education (ECE) is receiving increased priority by policy makers in many countries of the world. Equitable access to quality early childhood education is increasingly viewed by policy makers as a way of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning for children and supporting educational and social needs of the families. While countries are increasingly determined to increase the provision of early childhood Education (ECE), these policy developments are often motivated by economic and political goals (Urban 2009:12). On a general note, ECE is

targeted at advancing integrated and holistic development from birth to age 8. Early childhood education is any group of program designed to promote children's intellectual social, emotional, language, physical development and learning from birth to the age of eight (Olowe, Kutelu, and Majebi, 2014; Sooter, 2013). The aims of ECE include fostering proper development of children, identifying and addressing their problems, harnessing their potentials, molding their characters, enhancing their learning and equipping them for life so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal, communal and global development (Mahula, 2007)

While the contribution of ECE toward broader social, economic and education goals is being recognized (OECD 2009), the sector remains under developed in a number of countries (gaps in provision and inadequate quality in services), due to (in part), lack of investments, as well as the diversity of bodies and actors involved in its organization and provision that may not be well coordinated or regulated. For instance, the OECD (2009) report states that: 'In many OECD countries, the level of regulation of services for children gives rise for concern: much of the child care sectors are private and unregulated, with staff training and pedagogical programming being particularly weak'.

Education International refers to services for young children as early childhood education (ECE). This includes all kinds of education taking place before compulsory schooling and provided in different kinds of settings-nurseries, crèches, childcare centres, kindergartens, pre-schools, and other similar institutions (1998 Congress Resolution on Early Childhood education, Kamerman, 2001; Kamerman and Gatenio, 2003; Plantenga and Siegel, 2004). Sustainable Development is another concept that needs explanation. It is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, 1987:43). Sustainable development could otherwise be called "equitable and balanced", meaning that in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interest of different groups of people, within the same generations, and do so simultaneously in three major interrelated areas-economic, social and environmental. So sustainable development is about equity (defined as equity of opportunities) for well being as well as about comprehensiveness of objectives (U.S Department of Education, 2007).

Development goals are objectives if realized, will ensure development. They are no poverty, zero hunger, good health and Well-being, Quality education as well as gender equality. Others are clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry innovation and infrastructure as well as reduced inequalities. The eleventh goal is sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action below water and life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions and lastly partnerships for the goals. These goals are stipulated by UNDP.

Indeed there is a direct relationship between early childhood education and realization of these goals leading to sustainable development. Early childhood education provides a sound footing and foundation that equips a child to become professional and competent to handle the development issues outlined earlier. Educational International (EI) says early childhood education is rooted in the idea that: *It is the most critical period for cognitive and social development, the acquisition of languages and early literacy. Early childhood education should be recognized as a first step of basic education, as a fully integrated sector within national education systems. Provision should be universally accessible and free for all children. High quality early childhood education provides the foundation for life-long learning and stimulates children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive and linguistic development (Educational International, 2006).*

The above quotation stipulates the link between early childhood education and sustainable development. Clearly a man or woman be he/she a president of a country, chief executive officer, academic, captain of an industry, health expert was first of a child. That he/she attained the aforementioned heights and makes impact in societal development depends completely on the life- long childhood foundation. It is this foundation that makes it possible for his/her social, emotional, physical and cognitive capabilities leading to their contribution to societal advancement.

In developing countries, early childhood education services are often scarce in rural areas as the majority of services are in capital cities and urban centers. Examples can be found in such countries like Brazil, Nepal, Mexico, Hungary, the Gambia, Nigeria, Togo and Venezuela UNICEF (2008:3), Educational International (2006), IBE, 2006). In the Gambia, only few programs have been implemented in rural areas. In Togo, access to early childhood education services in rural areas is only around 8% and about 60% of all early childhood services are located in two main cities. In Nepal a very limited percentage of children have access to private, fee-paying, pre-school establishment that are almost exclusively based in urban areas (UNESCO IBE, 2008), greatly disadvantaged children in rural parts of the country. Further, early childhood education centers that are located in rural areas often have poor infrastructure, and lack appropriate facilities and equipment as evidenced by situation in Nigeria and Ghana (IBE, 2006).

High cost of school fees is another factor to children's access to early childhood education programs especially in developing countries where many parents are unable to afford fees particularly in private /ECE centers. This is especially the case in developing nations where ECE structures are often private and fee charging such as the Gambia, Nepal, Ghana and Togo among others (UNESCO, 2008).

A child's readiness for schooling is much dependent on meeting his/her comprehensive needs –physical and motor development, language and literacy, social and emotional development; approaches to learning and cognitive development. If a

child starts school with deficits in these areas, it will be difficult to catch up (National Association of Childcare Resource and Referral Agencies NACCRRA, 2010). The theory of critical constructivism comes into play here. Critical constructivism theory originally known as genetic epistemology was first coined by Swiss thinker Jean Piaget. In its original form, constructivism refers to the study of how individual human mental structures are constructed over time and how neural networks previously trained to perform given symbolic actions become conditions to subsequent ones. As mental structures develop, they define a person's ability to engage in other actions in the future. The theory argues that once knowledge is achieved (learned) especially at early stage of life, the individual cannot unlearn it unless there is brain injury or a degenerative illness. Piaget chose to study children of all ages and discovered that knowledge is constructed over time through complex interactions in which the individual makes the sense of self and of the world. Construction occurs when the neural pathways of the mind are progressively shaped through interaction (Delia, O'keefe and O'keefe, (1982) Fosnot, (2005) Van Glasersfeld (1996).

Critical construction is laudably related to this work in the sense that the children need to be "constructed" early enough in the most qualitative way if they are to sustain the developmental goals that are set before them. And as the theory states, progressive shaping can be achieved in the children through childhood education. Indeed development is a task that only competent persons can handle with expected results and such developmental goals highlighted in this paper will be handled and sustained if parents and learning centers are cooperative in "constructing" children at early stage. This will enable children acquire life-long learning that shapes their social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic and philosophical capacities, positioning them to take up challenges associated with sustainable development.

Importance of ECE

1. Investing in young children is both the right and the smart thing to do. Advocates argue, with increasing evidence, that ECE should be a major priority on a country's development agenda, a major contributor to breaking poverty cycles as the Education For All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out (Naudeau, 2011; UNESCO, 2011.).

2. Learning begins before a child first walks into a classroom, and so can lifetime advantages and disadvantages. Although early childhood is a period of great potential for growth and development, it is also a time when children are especially vulnerable to being left behind. Such is often the case in the poorest countries and the poorest social strata of even very rich countries. A child born in the developing world has a four out of ten chance of living in extreme poverty, and relative poverty stubbornly persists in a number of developed countries (UNESCO, 2007). In both contexts, children from disadvantaged groups have the most to gain from ECE – and the most to lose from being excluded.

3. Early intervention is crucial. The skills developed in early childhood form the basis for future learning and labour market success, making early childhood a critical time of human capital accumulation (Naudeau, 2011). Delays in cognitive and overall development well before a child enters primary school often have long-lasting consequences for children, their families and society at large, and they are more costly to remedy. Conversely, evidence from many countries shows that quality ECE can narrow the “opportunity divide” and reduce poverty, ethnic and linguistic disadvantages (UNESCO, 2010).

4. Despite the overwhelming case for building strong early foundations, ECE remains a peripheral concern within education systems virtually everywhere, characterized by insufficient resources and fragmented planning (UNESCO, 2011). Evidence strongly suggests that those who need ECE the most, receive it the least. The majority of poor children in low- and middle-income countries do not have access to high-quality ECE (Naudeau, 2011). Household poverty and low levels of parental education are two of the most critical barriers to early childhood programmes (UNESCO, 2010).

5. Neurobiologist and other brain researcher in recent decades have determined that much of the child’s brain architecture is set during the first five years of life. Certain sensitive periods exist before the age of 3 during which adequate stimulation must be received or development is impaired (UNICEF, 2001:). Even if the capacity for human brain reorganization continues throughout life and can be enhanced by remedial interventions, there is a wide consensus that during early childhood the brain is taking shape with a speed that will never again be equaled (UNICEF, 2001). The longer a society waits to intervene in the life cycle of a disadvantaged child, the more costly it is to put right (Naudeau, 2011).

6. Early interventions are the most cost effective in that they minimize the need for special interventions, have the most significant effects on children’s development and learning and have a decisive and lasting impact on how children grow to adulthood. An early start in education is particularly important for children from disadvantaged families: by the time children enter primary school, disparities in language skills linked to income and other factors are often so marked that children never catch up. Evidence from the United Kingdom shows that test scores at 22 months are a strong predictor for educational qualifications at 22 years (UNESCO, 2010). The issue of differences between home and school language is particularly important in impeding the progress of immigrant children.

7. Children who do not receive guidance in monitoring or regulating their behavior during the early years have a greater chance of being anxious, impulsive and behaviorally disorganized when they reach school (UNICEF, 2001). This implies that early childhood programmes cannot only benefit all children, but also help compensate for young children’s negative experiences as a result of conflict, lack of stimulation or nutritional inputs – more than 200 million children in developing countries under the

age of 5 are exposed to these multiple risks that negatively affect their development (Naudeau, 2011).

8. Most centre-based programmes focus on children aged 4 to 5; however, data from a United States early longitudinal study showed that the strongest cognitive benefits are experienced by those children who entered a centre-based programme between the ages of 2 and 3. A similar evaluation in the Philippines came to the same conclusion. These studies seem to affirm the value of providing centre-based ECE to children as young as 2, especially for the most vulnerable groups (Naudeau, 2011).

9. The positive impacts of ECE on readiness for further education are well documented, leading to a growing view that it should be seen as a public good (OECD, 2006). ECE programmes can: improve school readiness; make enrolment in the first grade more likely; reduce delayed enrolment, drop-out and grade repetition; and increase completion and achievement. Evidence comes from evaluation in both developed and developing countries, for example Myanmar, Nepal, Turkey and United Kingdom. Controlling for Global Domestic Product (GDP), the higher an African country's ECE enrolment ratio, the higher its primary completion rate and the lower its primary school repetition rate. The impact of ECE is stronger for children from poor families in terms of lower drop-out and repetition rates than those from more advantaged children (UNESCO, 2007). Research from the United States shows that the beneficial impact of ECE on children from poorer families is twice as high as for those with a more advantaged background (Barnett, 2004). Additionally, there are positive benefits for girls' education (Naudeau, 2011).

10. Early childhood interventions have a future social rationale in helping reduce inequalities linked to poverty, gender, race/ethnicity, caste or Religion. Studies in the United States showed that the benefits of ECE are higher for marginalized children. In developing countries, the ECE benefit has been shown for girl's enrolment and completion of primary school (UNESCO, 2007). ECE as an investment in disadvantaged young children is a rare public policy with a double benefit of promoting fairness and social justice (UNESCO, 2007; UNESCO, 2011).

Early Childhood Education as a Right of the Child

Literacy programmes are indispensable because literacy is a necessary skill itself and the foundation of other life skills. Article 28 of the convention of the rights of the Child (1989) emphasizes on the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieve this right progressively on the basis of equal opportunity makes it mandatory for all states to:

- a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all
- b) States shall promote and encourage international co-operation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and

technical knowledge and teaching methods. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.

What the above provision points to is that if the right to education of children are not guaranteed and sustainably protected, there will be no sustainable development. Illiteracy and ignorance will prevail from childhood to adulthood and development will at some point cease as children will grow up to be incompetent and in equipped to take developmental roles in the society. The laudable expected development goals will not be understood, let alone implemented. Indeed, early childhood education is a right first to children and the beneficial to all humans on earth for the purpose of development.

Challenges of ECE in Nigeria

Funding: Funding needs to be given maximum consideration because it is very crucial to achieving success in any educational enterprise. In ECE, adequate funds need to be made available for provision of many resources and activities which include stimulating materials for teaching, training and re-training of staff (teachers and caregivers), enrichment and sensitization of programmes through regular workshops, monitoring, feeding, immunisation, supervision and inspection, report writing, publications, school meals and training manuals among others (Alabi & Ijaiya, 2014). This indicates that the importance of funding to successful implementation of ECE in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The sad thing however is that Nigerian ECE is ridiculously underfunded. This could be linked to the low budgetary allocation to the education sector in the nation. Perhaps, this is the reason for the report of The Good Planet Foundation (2013) on Nigeria that spending on essentials such as textbooks, instructional materials, in-service training, operations and maintenance is inadequate. The underfunding of ECE at pre-primary school level in Nigeria has been documented (Osakwe, 2011; Amali, 2012; The Good Planet Foundation, 2013; Alabi & Ijaiya, 2014).

Early childhood curriculum: Curriculum is the pipeline, the conduct through which any educational programme can be successfully administered. ECE curriculum so critical a written plan, outlining goals for children's learning and development and how this could be realized. Curriculum highlights which teacher, as well as which material will be used in achieving the set goals for the children (National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL), 2012). The challenge is that trice it was canceled, this curriculum is not found in almost all preparing schools in Nigeria. The non availability of the National early childhood curriculum for ages 0-5 years in pre-primary schools has been confirmed by many researchers (Viaton, 2011; Amali 2012, Okewole, *et al.*, 2013).

Resources Availability of resources determines the successful implementation of ECE as it facilitates the teacher/caregiver to nurture and support the development of children. This in fact helps implementation of curriculum. The quantity and quality of resources for educational programme determine schools synthesis system's capacity for quality delivery (Chukubikem, 2013). Yet there are not enough resources for pre-primary education sector of public primary schools in Nigeria (Osho, *et al.*, Amali, *et al.*, 2012; Okewole, *et al.*, 2013, Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri and Dagunduro, (2011).

Professional development: The teacher holds a critical stake for successful execution of any educational programme. Goble and Horm (2010) argue that no matter what one's profession is, one needs to undertake regular training for enhanced professionalism- better methods of handling things and issues. However, some researchers have found out that professionalism is lacking among teachers who handle ECE in Nigeria (Olaleye and Omotayo, 2009; Vitonu *et al.*, 2011).

Supervision: Despite huge benefits that supervision has on education –motivation, modification (Amino, 2014), supervision is lacking in ECE in Nigeria (Osakwe, 2011, Nakpodia, 2011; Sooter, 2013).

Staff-child Ratio: Caregivers receive less stress and are able to provide more support to different children's developmental domains (Huntsman, 2008). The lower staff child ratio is the scenario in Nigeria, Classroom in early childhood development (ECD) centers in Nigeria is overcrowded, with an average of more than 130 children per class in the north (The Food Planet Foundation, 2013; Osho *et al.*, 2013; Osho *et al.*, 2014).

The Way Forward for Nigeria

For Nigeria to benefit from ECE programs as it is obtainable elsewhere in the world, it is important to observe the following guidelines:

1. The program should be able to help families obtain a developmental check-up as a way of supporting optimal child development.
2. It should also be able to identify early developmental risk and/or delays because behavioral and educational interventions can improve outcomes for children in cognitive, motor, language and social domains.
3. It should promote developmental check-ups as this will not only help the child and family but also help educators respond to children's strengths and needs in order to maximize their learning, development, and growth.
4. ECE programs and staff should have frequent contact with young children and families.
5. ECE programs and staff should have insightful observations about a child's strengths and needs.

6. ECE programs and staff should have behavioral or developmental concerns about a child.
7. ECE programs and staff should be the first resource a family turns to when they have a concern about their child's health and development.

ECE providers should have the resources to respond to any of these scenarios and share relevant health and developmental information with parents and early childhood providers in the community, such as healthcare providers or Early Start programs. It is important for ECE programs to have some basic forms and resources to help coordinate any services or supports that are critical to a young child's health and development.

Conclusion

It makes sense to infer from the foregoing that a sustainable development goal is a wonderful document but its implementation is more important. Adults are the ones who drafted this document and they are no doubt well educated. It will be foolhardy to think about the concept of sustainable development without carrying the childhood in the picture because who sustains the development? It is also concluded that more developing nation's policy makers are paying more than usual attention to the concept of sustainable development but this effort is faced with a lot of challenges such as early childhood curriculum, resources availability, professional development, supervision and staff-child ratio among others.

Recommendations

1. The early childhood education is a right and should be recognized as such by parents, government and all stakeholders.
2. Curriculum should not be developed, but it should be launched by teachers who handle early childhood education.
3. Resources should be made available by governments and parents to aid implementation of early childhood education especially in developing nations of the world.
4. Professionalism of the teachers interpreting the curriculum for childhood education should not be toy with if this goal of sustainable development is to be realized.
5. Staff-child ratio must be standardized for effective delivery of knowledge to the children by the teachers.
6. Agencies and the appropriate bodies should supervise teachers and motivate them to successes in delivering education to children upon whom sustainable development is contingent.

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