



A Call for Excellence in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT: *There has been much concern in various sectors on how to make the 21st century usher in improved offerings over the past one. “This is why as early as early 1990s slogans such as education, health, housing etc for all by the 2000 began to emerge. Today we are in the middle of 2016 amidst so called 21 century; most of the expectations have not been met. This is why this paper has been put up to seek ways of improving one of the foundations of education so that the broad aims of education can be met in no distant future from today.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The level of development of any nation depends on the quality of education provided for its citizenry. From the above logic, it could be asserted that the quality of education available compete globally as quality education provider. This is why Dantata (2009), saw education as a global asset which every nation strives to possess. Anan (2000) conceptualized it as a human right with immense power to transform, and its foundation rests the corner stone’s of freedom =, democracy and sustainable human development.

Education like a building requires sound foundation. In Nigeria, there is type of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). ECCE as the name implies has to do with the types of edycation the child received after home education and before primary education. This level of education prepares the child for primary education and other levels of education. It remains the foundation upon which the entire education is built, and whose stability determine the quality and stability of later educational pursuits at all levels.

Early childhood education is necessary for every child. It is the key and invaluable exposure to success in life. This is because the nature of education a child receives in the first five years of life is critical for his or her overall development and later life chances (Maduwesi, 2005). This is not an understatement as Wikipedia (2010). Hence, early children education and good care is of paramount importance for children. This level of education encompasses the crèche, nursery and kindergarten.

Objectives And Types Of Early Childhood Education

The purpose of early childhood care and education as specified in Section 2 sub-section 13 of the NPE (FRN, 2004) elucidates the critical importance of this sub-section of education. The policy stated that the purpose of early childhood education shall be to:

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

It is evident, from the above mentioned philosophies that this level of education is adequately taken care off. The point to note here is that the policy clearly stipulates that development of early child hood education is the jurisdiction of private corporate bodies, such as religious group, philanthropic organization and private entrepreneurs. This could be regarded as Dantata (2009) puts it that despite broad philosophy in the

policy provision, the principles seem to be exclusive of early childhood education as a component of the larger education system.

The NPE (2004), identifies three components of early childhood education which include the Day care/Creche group, pre-nursery/play group and Nursery/kindergarten.

Day Care/Creche Group:- This takes care of children from 0-2 years. The centre admits and looks after children from families whose parents are not at home for some hours in the day. Here, a child receives adequate care and supervision by care givers.

Pre-nursery/Play group:- This admits children from age 3-4 years. It provides care with well designed curriculum. It is set to provide programmes with educational content which lead to the overall development of the child. Most of these types of schools established by organizations are far better than those established by private proprietors in terms of space, qualified staff and instructional material (Ibrahim, 2009).

Nursery/Kindergarten:- This is the third type of pre-school institution, it usually admits and caters for older children from 4-5 years. This aspect of primary school is the preparatory section of pre-primary school and as such, more effort is supposed to be given there to expose children to readiness skills so as to cope with primary school tasks. Children by their nature at this stage respond positively to the curriculum with high academic content through play as a method of instruction.

Prospects of Early Childhood Care and Education Cognitive Development:

The secret of the prospect of early childhood education is contingent upon time and nature. Commenting on the right time, which is the crucial and sensitive early years especially the first five years in order to catch them young. It is usually said that to everything, there is a season and time to every purpose (Ecclesiastes 3:1 Holy Bible). This implies that there is an appropriate time or period of getting children started in early childhood care and education especially when no harm or damage has been done in children's lives. Again, there is a certain aspect of learning that can only be acquired effectively during the first seven years of life. For instance, language ability has been found to be an important predictor of reading ability. Therefore, childhood education helps in giving children optimum opportunities for language acquisition. From the age of eight years, the child's ability to learn language is equal to that of an adult. It is therefore, very wise to exploit this wonderful opportunity that is presented only once in every child's life and only for a short space of time. After this period, an individual becomes too old to learn languages (Mandela, 2011).

Emotional Development

Children are known to be highly emotional and closely attached to parents and other close siblings. Through early childhood education the child gradually learns to part with his family in a healthier manner. This healthy emotional development is fostered in the school environment through the various activities like, dances, plays, songs and colourful play materials (toys) which keep the child's mind off much thinking about the home.

Social Development

In early childhood care and education, the child undergoes social development. This is evident, since it is not only one child that learns in the pre-primary environment, children from diverse backgrounds are made to stay, play and learn together, come to appreciate, respect, share each other's things and respect each other's feelings. Hence in this dimension social development has taken place on the child. This development is extended to the home environment.

Development of the Society

Early childhood learning programmes help working parents fulfil their responsibilities. According to Calman and Tair-Whelman (2005), it generates economic development from communities in the short run in the form of goods and services, and a more efficient work force. In the long-run, quality early childhood education builds an enjoyable, educated work force. Children who received quality early education arrive at the school ready to learn and they do better in school. They are more likely to graduate from high school and to hold jobs.

Supporting this, UNICEF (1999) states that children who receive good care during early childhood are more likely to benefit from later education and social services, they are also likely to be more productive, healthy and law abiding citizens.

Challenges of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria Lack of government participation/patronage

Nigerian government has been seen as having invested much in the implementation of education at all levels, with the exception of the early childhood education. Lack of government participation at this level of education has created an avenue for proliferation of private early childhood schools in different parts of the country. Most of the owners, it can be argued do not even understand the National Policy on Education and lack the necessary educational background to run a school of that nature (Hamza, 2003).

Lack of qualified manpower

To effectively develop and achieve results in early childhood care and education, human infrastructure is the most potent factor, for teachers determine to a great extent, the quality of education received in schools. Igbokwe cited in Obuweluzo (2011) states that teachers constitute the fulcrum on which the educational sector resolves. No educational system can rise above the level of its teachers (FEN, 2004). Unfortunately, qualified/competent teachers are lacking in most early childhood education centers today.

A survey conducted by Ityav (2009) in Makurdi revealed that 30% of the teachers in pre-primary institutions could be said to be adequately and professionally qualified. Most of the teachers are either diploma or WASC holders awaiting admission or fresh graduate from whatever discipline awaiting National Service. In most cases, teachers who were said to be highly qualified with first or second degree had little in common with pre-primary education, thereby lacking the basic pedagogical skills to perform teaching task but were using teaching as a stepping stone.

Lack of infrastructural facilities

The dearth of physical facility is another challenge. The most inadequate according to Obiweluzo (2011) were the school pupils and teachers furniture, electricity and toilet facilities. These to a large extent, mars quality performance in early childhood schools. However, the situation on the ground is better imagined than seen. Substantial number of pre-primary schools lacks the “basic” facilities like class-rooms not to talk of recreational facilities. Sometimes even the bare floor for pupils to play is not found as they operate in residential apartments, churches and empty ware houses. This situation is really counterproductive.

Lack of instructional aids

The major challenges to teachers in early childhood education centres these days includes lack of materials to be used. These materials (toys, diagrams, pictures, charts, crayon, paper, books, overhead projectors etc) supplement the teachers’ explanations and make learners gain better understating of both concepts and ideas presented to them. The absence of these materials affects learning negatively particularly at pre-primary level of education where most of the teaching is done by illustrations with practical examples.

of adequate supervision

Schools generally need proper supervision which is a process of checking the strengths and weaknesses of schools from time to time. This is because it can assist in bringing change or innovation for the betterment of the whole pre-primary education system. Since government these days, have little or no direct control of pre-primary education, it finds it difficult to carry out routine inspection and supervision of these schools so as to correct in-balances and abnormalities found in them.

Lack of motivation

Motivation contributes largely to the teacher’s performance while on duty. The condition of service especially in most pre-primary institutions is very pathetic. As such it has direct consequence on teacher’s performance. Most of the nursery schools pay between ₦5,000.00 and ₦ 8,000.00 per month to NCE holders as against ₦ 18,000.00 and ₦20,000.00 received by their counterparts in public primary schools. This range of salary is not odd enough to motivate a teacher at the pre-primary school level to teach effectively. Teaching profession is a unique profession like medical field which deals with soul and behaviour modification for the betterment of the society and country at large.

It is good enough that we have had formal early childhood education introduced. There is need for this level of education so the result of the individuals education would be meaningful. This era has been more sophisticated than the past one in technology. Speed of communication and depth of knowledge such that the world is described as a “global village”. Therefore, there is need for this consciousness to be developed in proprietors and head teachers of early childhood institutions so that they plan their curriculum to respond to the needs of the time. This becomes even more serious when one understands that by the age of 7, the child has developed well over 90% of his mental capacity. There is need to provide adequately for him since after early childhood period only 10% can be intervened. Taking these into consideration:

- Must we leave this period in the hands of ill-informed, unqualified and un-trained teachers so that we may make financial gains?
- Must we continue to pay teachers of this sector so little that they look elsewhere for what to supplement in order to survive thereby paying little attention to the education of our children?
- Must the disparity which is occurring at present be allowed to continue between the privilege and the less privileged?
- Can our government not attach pre-primary classes to every existing primary school in the state?

- Can our government not step up routine inspection to our early childhood institutions to ensure that standards are maintained?
 - Now that computer education is a household word, can't the Nigerian child start computer education right from his early childhood days?
 - Is there no way of intervention in Early Child Care (ECC) so that our children are received in schools strong and healthy?
 - Can we not improve in the provision of instructional materials for our children?
 - Can the child's out-door exploratory experiences not be improved upon such that his interest in science become sharpened? I believe these questions will excite you to reason out strategies of improving early childhood education so that this segment of the child's education will respond to the exigencies of the time. For me, the starting point should include:
1. Establishment of early childhood education is a capital intensive endeavour, government should as a matter of urgency establish early childhood schools along primary schools as stipulated in the Universal Basic Education act. This should be done by allocating fund for it and investing such fund into providing schools, furniture, equipment and man power needed for this levels of education.
 2. Private proprietors and the government should employ the services of qualified and committed teachers in early childhood education for sound foundation.
 3. Teachers' salaries in both government and private schools should be made attractive, paid regularly and the working environment improved.
 4. Existing teachers should undergo training in early childhood education to enable them to care and teach children effectively.
 5. There should be uniform minimum standard for early childhood education in Nigeria education. The official curriculum should be provided and compulsorily implemented.
 6. Government should provide adequate teaching aids for effective learning at this level and sponsor workshop; seminars and conferences for more teaching skills.
 7. Teachers available should be encouraged to improvise teaching aids using local materials available.
 8. Supervisions and inspections should take their duties seriously and uphold their integrity, conscience and belief in doing what is right, government should equally provide the needs of the inspectors to be able to carry out the duties effectively.

II. CONCLUSION

Early childhood education is too sensitive a segment for one to allow to chance. The government, parents, teachers, proprietors and indeed everybody should get involved to ensure that adequate and functional education is given to the children. We should remember that no strong structure can ever stand on a weak foundation. Sincerity of purpose should be the watch word when dealing with children so that with improved strategies the foundation of our children's education would ensure sustainable personal development.

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