

Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: Innovations and Challenges

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Abstract

Early childhood education has metamorphosed from ordinary provision of care for children while their parents are at work, to a provision for adequate care, education, training and development of the child. Over the years many innovations have been made in the policy, nature and curriculum of early childhood education in Nigeria. The paradigm shift from survival to development in early childhood is necessitated by the consensus that the early years are crucial and important phase for the overall development of the child throughout lifespan. Experiences during the early years have a lasting influence on the mental, social, emotional, language and physical development of the child. The quality of the environment determines the quality of experience acquired by the child. Researchers have established that good quality education and care provided for children in their early years help them to succeed at school and later in life. This article examined and explained the status of this level of education, the improvements and innovations that have been successfully implemented as well as the challenges and how they can be remedied. Therefore, it was recommended that government should be more proactive and more committed to the course of achieving quality in early childhood education and that caregivers should be well trained and professionally qualified.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, innovations, challenges*

Introduction

The early childhood stage is the bedrock upon which all other educational levels is built and the starting point for a child's development. The early years of life corresponds to a critical period of rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial development of the child. The quality and intensity of care, nutrition and stimulation a child receives during this period determines to a large extent the level of physical and cognitive development a child can attain. This position flows from the achievements of science over recent decades, from discoveries on the evolution of the brain (70 per cent of which is formed before birth) and on the evolution of the individual from sensorimotor stage to pre-operational stage before the age of 7. The Dakar Conference in 2000 reminded us that 'Learning Begins at Birth'. Furthermore, research evidence from many fields of study showed that the care and support received by a child in terms of good health, nutrition and psycho-social care and protection are crucial in the formation and development of intelligence, personality and social behavior. In that sense, investment in early childhood development and early childhood education is the best way for individual and social development.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the education given in educational institutions to children prior to entering the primary schools. It is common practice in most societies to make provision for early childhood education programs of various types for children below the official school age (usually 6 years) mainly to prepare them for the rigors of primary education and beyond (Obidike, 2012). Early Childhood Education is flexible in structure with baby-friendly and learning friendly environment. The infrastructure has specification and varieties with tender and sensitive furniture. The establishment and management of Early Childhood Education centres are facilitated and regulated by government rules and regulations, which ensure standardization but very little uniformity. Early Childhood Education develops in children school readiness, with positive

economic and social impacts lasting well into adulthood from higher education attainment and less chance of involvement in criminal activities, to higher status employment and higher earnings (Schweinhardt, 2007, Sparling, Ramey and Ramey, 2007). This article examines the various innovations and interventions that has gone into the development of early childhood care and development education so far. Several ideas and challenges stimulated these examination as would be shown in the discussion

History of Early Childhood in Nigeria

Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) in Nigeria predates the colonial and postcolonial periods considering the traditional ECCDE practices which was prevalent among all human groups before the introduction of the formal type in the nineteenth century. ECCDE is a universal phenomenon in all human societies and signifies the need to give special care for the development of children from birth and throughout the early formative years of their development. Members of the family, women in particular and siblings had the responsibility of providing ECCDE from birth to six years of their development.

According to Oyewumi, Alhassan, and Ofoha, (2010), the formal Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Nigeria started with the British colonial master's children. It soon spread to their employee Nigerians who tried to imitate their masters. However, Akinbote, (2006) opined that infant classes started at the Church premises which served as the venues for the schools, organized by missionaries, with their wives often in charge of their children and those of their members. He further stressed that a section of Sunday schools was also dedicated for focusing on these children and as the number of the children increased, school days were soon spread from Sunday alone to span Monday to Friday. At that time only the wealthy could afford to send their children for such education. (Osho, Aliyu, Okolie, & Onifade, 2014). The ages of children in these infant classes varied from six to fourteen years. Children had to place their hands across their heads to touch their ears before they qualified for admission (Gabriel, 2014)

The strong desire to make education in Nigeria to be relevant in meeting the economic, social, and cultural needs of the nation after independence was partly responsible for the Federal Government in the 1960s and 70s to wield a lot of influence in the educational sector. First, through the National Curriculum Conference held in Lagos in September 1969, the whole spectrum of the nation's educational system which was predominantly British influenced was reviewed for relevance to Nigeria's needs under the auspices of the Federal Government. (Gabriel, 2013). This later gave birth to the 1977 National Policy on Education, but Early Childhood Education (ECE) was not given adequate recognition as the role of the federal government was just supervisory. From the Late 1980s there was an increased concern about the education and welfare of children in Nigeria, particularly those within the early childhood range. A number of events induced changes in the attitude and perception of early childhood education by a larger proportion of the adult populace, and Federal Government intervention at this level of education.

The introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE), an initiative that afforded free education proved to be the lifeline for the children from poor homes. As more children were sent to school the availability of these children for household servants declined rapidly. The needs of working mothers at that time for where to keep their babies thus became the catalyst for the growth of nursery schools in Nigeria. The Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), an agency of the FGN had as early as 1987 commenced the expansion of ECE which had been restricted to children between the ages of three and five years to really accommodate these below, that is, from birth to two years. The establishment of an Early Child Care Development and Education (ECCDE) unit in NERDC, also in 1987 by the FGN was an innovation that projected and facilitated the development of ECCDE in Nigeria. In 2000, Nigeria along with other 164 countries at World

Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal pledged to a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youths and adults by 2015. However, observations indicate that not much has been done in the area of pre-primary education in Nigeria despite the global commitment (Idemudia, 2006)

Early childhood education (ECE) provision is becoming a growing priority, and has received increased policy attention, in many countries during the past years, Nigeria inclusive. Equitable access to quality early childhood education is increasingly viewed by policy makers as a way of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and supporting the educational and social needs of families.

However, an analysis of the current situation indicates that, to a great extent, the Nigerian child suffers deprivation from lack of good social services in terms of poor nutrition, health care, and access to safe water and sanitation, general protection from environmental hazards and insecurity. All of these gave justification for the formulation of National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (IECD), which was officially launched in October 2007. This created an avenue for early childhood care and development in Nigeria to adopt an integrated approach for the care and support given to children aged 0 through 5 years.

This is a holistic approach in which the Federal Ministry of Education collaborates with other ministries including, Health, Environment and Housing, Women Affairs, Information and Communication, Finance, Agriculture, and Water Resources, as well as the National Planning Commission to provide interventions for the cognitive, physical, social, moral, and emotional development of the child. Early childcare in Nigeria has metamorphosed from a single sector approach to a multi-sector pursuit, converging interventions in health, nutrition, care, stimulation, protection, and participation of the child.

In Nigeria today, Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) is an aspect of Universal Basic Education which was introduced in 1999 to increase the access of children to basic education and improve the state of education in the country. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in 2009 conducted a survey on ECCDE, which reported a wide disparity between the expected and actual enrolments. The expected enrolment in ECCDE was 22 million based on the population of 2006 but the actual enrolment was 2.02 million, leaving 19.98 million out of school (FGN, 2009). From the foregoing, it was obvious that, this 2.02 million enrolment was what the private schools could absorb. Based on this obvious gap, a directive was given to State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs) to establish pre-primary schools in each of the public primary schools in their respective states, this decision, was in line with the UBE acts of 2004 (FGN, 2009).

However, this integration of ECCDE in public schools is backed up by government financing and supported by the community, individuals and foreign sponsorship. For instance, three states in the Federation namely Kwara, Kaduna and Kano were given special World Bank Grant in 2008 -2011 to set up model Early Childhood Education centres. In Kwara state, model Early Childhood Education is run in public schools with support mainly from the national purse through counterpart funding and international agencies such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and ESSPIN (Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria). (FGN, 2009)

Moreover, five percent of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) intervention fund was set aside for provision of pre- primary education in Nigeria (UBE Act, 2004). With this, the Government is now directly responsible for pre-primary education. This constitutes a major step in the right direction in the provision of good early childhood education to all Nigerian Children. Also, In August 2004, the NERDC with the support from UNICEF convened a meeting of experts and stakeholders in early childcare to agree on the minimum standard for operating childhood care centers in an integrated way in Nigeria. This effort resulted in the production of what is today the National

Minimum Standards for Early Childcare Centers in Nigeria. The basic innovations are therefore enumerated.

Innovations on Policy Statement

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1977 that restructured the education system in Nigeria and its curriculum was the first government document/law that recognized ECCDE which it referred to as pre-primary education for children between the ages of three and five plus, prior to their commencement of primary school education. (Gabriel, 2015). Thus, the purpose of education at this level was to:

- a) Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- b) Preparing the child for primary level
- c) Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, etc);
- d) Inculcating social norms;
- e) 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;
- f) Teaching co-operation and team spirit
- g) Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours shapes forms, etc through play;
- h) Teaching good habits, especially good health habits.

By this policy early childhood education was harmonized for uniformity in theory and practice nationwide. However, the usual problem is in the implementation of the policy. The significance of the status accorded this level of education is also reflected in the role of the Federal Government towards the achievement of the objectives earlier enunciated. For example, Government in this period undertook to:

- 1) Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education which meant that she would not establish any, even as a model for other stakeholders to emulate
- 2) Make provision in Teacher Training Institutions for student teachers who want to specialize in pre-primary education;
- 3) Ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community;
- 4) Develop the orthography for the many more Nigerian Languages, and
- 5) Produce textbooks in Nigerian Languages;
- 6) Ensure that the main method of teaching in the pre-primary institution will be through play, and that the curriculum of Teacher Training Colleges is appropriately oriented to achieve this;
- 7) Regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education as well as ensure that the staff of pre-primary institutions are adequately trained and that essential equipment is provided.

The 1981 and 1998 revised versions of the NPE did not have any different input on pre-primary education as such the Federal Government continued with a monitoring and supervisory role in early childhood education (ECE).

In 2004 National policy on Education (NPE), Government became more proactive and included the following:

- * Government shall establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community and private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.
- * Make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education.

- * Set and monitor minimum standards for Early Childhood Care Centres in the country, and ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers' associations in the running and maintenance of Early Childhood Education facilities. It is thus clear that government has begun to show keen interest in Early Childhood/Pre-primary Education. (Adejobi, 2005)
- * It is plausible that the provisions of this revised 2004 Policy as well as global attention on a comprehensive care of children through a multi-sectoral approach contributed to the development of the National Policy For Integrated Early Children Development (IECD) in Nigeria. The policy adopted a holistic approach in which the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) collaborates with the Ministries of health, Environment and Housing, Women Affairs, Information and Communication, Finance, Agriculture and Water Resources, and National Planning Commission to provide intervention for the cognitive, physical, social, moral, and emotional development of the child.
- * The Early Years Development Consultative Committee (EYDCC) established by NERDC and which was inaugurated in 2002 produced this Policy document that is an innovation in education at this level. In order to harmonize practice and for uniformity, the National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centres in Nigeria was also produced by NERDC, supported by UNICEF.
- * Again, government proposed one year of ECCDE (Kindergarten education) but this did not commence since 2012 when it was conceived in principle till 2014 (UNESCO, 2007).

Innovations on Nomenclature

The term Early Childhood Education has been used severally for children of different age brackets who are yet to attain the school-going age. It is partly for this reason that they are referred to as pre-schoolers and they attend pre-school, pre-primary, institutions or nursery schools among others. In Nigeria, it is referred to as pre-primary education and defined as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 plus prior their entering the primary school (Federal Republic of Nigeria, NPE 1977, 1981 and 1998). The 2004 revised edition of the NPE referred to it as early childhood/ pre- primary education and defined as education given in an education institution to children prior their entering primary school. It includes the crèche, nursery and kindergarten as other institutions for such education. Here, it implies that younger persons are to be cared for and trained in formal settings as in the crèche day care and play group.

Innovations on curriculum and teacher development

Childhood education in the 1970s was not guided by any government designed curriculum. As private entrepreneurs, individuals and non-government organizations and religious bodies provided this level of education for profit, their curriculum varied and so did the qualification of teachers. Most of the teachers did not specialize in nursery education, even many of the proprietors. This situation implied that the Federal and State Ministries of Education did not effectively perform their supervisory, regulatory and control functions. However, these schools taught English language, through recognition of alphabets, words, simple sentences; recognition of numbers, how to count and simple addition for Mathematics; shapes and colours of objects, drawing and painting, writing, reading, rhymes, stories etc. (Gabriel, 2013)

By 1981 when the NPE was reviewed, NERDC also produced a curriculum 'to guide pre-primary education in Nigeria (NERDC, 1981). The contents reflected themes in creative arts, social studies, physical and health education, language and communication skills, mathematical skills and

basic science. This same curriculum was used until 2001, twenty years without revision and for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years, (Maduewesi, 2005).

Again, the Institutes of Education of the Universities of Lagos and Ibadan, with support from UNESCO and the Federal Ministry of Education organized short-term training programmes for early childhood education teachers. These were significant innovations, a departure from past practices which did not stipulate age range for pupils, uniform curriculum, types of texts to be used and teacher qualification.

With the development of the ECCDE which covers children from birth to 5 years (0-5 years), UNICEF assisted the FGN represented by NERDC to develop a non-conventional curriculum with a multi-sectoral approach and linkage in 1994. It was reviewed in 2000 but was not produced and circulated to schools.

The 2000 review incorporated global issues such as HIV/AIDS, peace and child rights education based on gender sensitivity. As usual, other components of the curriculum were to engender physical, affective, cognitive and language development, food and nutrition, harmful practices, health and safety measures

The challenges

Despite the various improvement and innovations witnessed in the past years, the following challenges are still observable in the system.

- * There is a preponderance of unapproved ECCDE schools both in the urban and rural areas.
- * The non-availability of a uniform curriculum. The curriculum produced were not adequately distributed to the schools and not given the needed publicity.
- * The dominance of ECCDE schools by non-governmental organizations and private individuals and inadequate supervision and full implementation of the FGN's innovations pre-primary schools have continued to develop more of the children's cognitive skills.
- * High fee-paying schools are patronized by the rich and they provide better quality education in terms of curriculum delivery, qualified staff, learning facilities and conducive learning environment which cannot be accessed by all.
- * None of the 36 States of Nigeria has fully implemented this provision of the NPE. Lagos, Akwa-Ibom and Ogun States have only skeletally implemented it. Part of States Government excuse for non- implementation of the innovation is inadequacy of funds. This remarkable innovation would have really catered for the OVC, most children in the rural areas and children from low socio-economic status if well implemented. (Gabriel, 2013)
- * Again, there is a dearth of qualified teachers in early childhood care and education in the country who will service this programme if ECCDE schools are provided as expected.
- * Most Federal and State owned Tertiary Education institutions do not offer pre-service training programmes for specialist teachers in early childhood education and most specialist teachers would not like to teach in many of the private schools because of the low salaries they pay and job insecurity. In most cases the teachers are not paid during the holidays in most private schools and this is very discouraging for career development
- * Lack of resources for Early Childhood Education (services has made it difficult to provide services beyond the capital and larger cities.
- * Child-teacher ratios are another indicator of the quality of early childhood education, in terms of whether children receive enough attention and stimulation. This is also a major challenge because most of the classes are overcrowded.

Recommendations

For Early Childhood Education (ECE) to take its rightful position in the life of children in Nigeria, the following should be considered.

- * Great political will is needed to give ECE its required status, fund it and attain good quality for human foundation. There is a high demand for ECE in the country as such there is hope for its continuity but more government involvement rather than mere regulatory function/role is needed.
- * A successful implementation of the NPE, the curriculum on ECC and ECE, the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria, the National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centres, and the UBE Act which are and bear innovations in ECE would facilitate the achievement of the objectives of ECE and ultimately, the philosophy of developing every Nigerian into a sound and effective citizen
- * Training and retraining of caregivers/teachers should be made a vital part of the education process.
- * Teaching and learning materials like furniture for both teachers and pupils, television sets/computer systems, nature table/corners, toys and models, charts and well drawings and playing equipment like see-saw, merry-go-round, slides etc. should be made a vital provision in all learning centres for effective teaching and learning.
- * Toilets, bathrooms, beds/beddings, clean and safe water and other basic facilities/resources should be made available.
- * A maximum of 30 pupils should be allocated to a teacher for effective teaching and learning. This may require employing more teachers who specialize in ECE.
- * Crèche / Day care levels should be introduced in all ECE learning centres to help working mothers.
- * It is strongly believed that if the above recommendations are implemented in Nigeria, the challenges confronting Early Childhood Education will be a thing of the past.

Conclusion

The vital roles played by early childhood education in the overall development of a child are recognised all over the world as it is generally believed that the nature and intensity of care, nutrition and stimulation a child receives during this period determines to a large extent the level of physical, cognitive and psychosocial development a child accomplish. This is evident in the attention and committed efforts of the government on early childhood education in Nigeria which include the inclusion of early childhood education in the definition of terms in the National Policy on Education (2004), the establishment of nursery classes in the existing primary schools, production of curriculum to cover 0 – 3years and inclusion of the department of early childhood education in the faculty of education of Universities and colleges of education and so on.

However, this level of education is facing some challenges such as preponderance of unapproved ECCDE schools, non-availability of a uniform curriculum, teaching without instructional materials, maintaining the primary school setting and structure and so on. This article therefore recommends the provision of basic resources such as qualified and competent teachers and care givers as well as appropriate learning environment in terms of space, security/safety and materials for playing/learning.

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