

Preparing Tomorrow's Workforce through Quality Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Today's children will be joining the workforce tomorrow. However, they need to be prepared for success in tomorrow's work environment. They need computer, writing, presentation, team work and problem-solving skills as well as workplace habits such as punctuality, reliability, ability to cope with failure, among others. A highly skilled future workforce leads to a prosperous economy. To stay competitive in an increasingly complex marketplace, and produce more workers who can take responsibility for the nation's economic prosperity in the decades ahead; rather than wait until young people are at the verge of entry into the job market to address this issue, investing in children's earliest learning experiences is a crucial step in cultivating a viable, productive workforce for Nigeria. This paper therefore focuses on ways in which qualitative early learning experiences could prepare Nigerian children as the future dynamic and productive workforce that would enable the nation take a seat of pride among the advanced nations of the world. It is recommended that the government should increase investment in quality early childhood education. Clubs and societies should also be introduced to children early in school, so that they can develop team spirit, self confidence and decision making skills which could help prepare them for their career in later life.

Key words: *early childhood, workforce, economy, skills, career.*

Introduction

Nigeria, in her drive towards a rapid development and advancement, has made education compulsory for all citizens within the school age. However, majority of these children drop out of school (UNICEF, 2012). Even though some continue to higher institutions of learning, a lack of qualified, job-ready candidates for available positions is one of the most urgent issues facing employers today. Many young people enter the job market lacking the knowledge base and strengths of character that distinguish quality employees. To stay competitive in an increasingly complex marketplace, Nigeria must produce more citizens and workers who can take responsibility for her economic prosperity in the decades ahead. Investment in human capital means economic success not only for those individuals being educated, but for the overall economy. It is the graduates of this system from which the labour pool is stocked and replenished and from which the leaders of the nation emerge.

However, preparing a productive workforce begins before children enter the primary school system. This is because the early years are years of rapid cognitive and social development during which children learn the basic skills that could help them live meaningful lives even into adulthood. Rather than wait until young people are on the cusp of college or career to address this issue, definite steps should be taken during early childhood to equip children with the basic skills that could help them grow into the future viable and productive workforce that would take the nation into greatness. This paper, therefore, examines the contribution of qualitative early childhood education in preparing the future workforce for the nation.

Importance of the Early Years

Education and skills development unlock the potential of individuals and shapes the quality of their lives. Learning takes place in all stages of life, but the biggest impact happens early in life. While it is well acknowledged that primary, secondary and post-secondary schooling develops and enhances key life skills and abilities, the learning that occurs during the first few years of life can have important, long-lasting effects that are often underestimated.

The human brain achieves 90% of postnatal growth between birth and age three and continues growing rapidly during the preschool years. Learning during this early period actually shapes the physical structure of the brain and lays the foundation for future emotional, social and cognitive development. According to Shonkoff & Phillips (2000), children who are stimulated and encouraged during the first five years begin to develop many of the basic skills and abilities that are crucial for their subsequent scholastic success: curiosity, self-confidence, self-control, motivation, group identification, goal orientation, and a love for learning.

There is strong evidence that once a child falls behind, they are likely to remain behind and so, to some extent, the basis for future learning and socio-emotional development is set before children start school (Heckman, 2006). Therefore, the opportunity for learning and acquisition of life skills presented in the early years should be utilised maximally by investing in early learning experiences for the good of the child, and in preparation for positive contribution to the society in later life.

Need for Quality

Lynch (2007) identified the key features of quality early childhood education to include teachers with four-year college degrees in early childhood education, professionally trained assistant teachers, teachers and assistant teachers who are well paid and have ongoing professional development opportunities (which results in low staff turnover), smaller teacher-child ratios, use of a professionally developed pre-school curriculum as well as monitoring and site visits by government or accrediting agency.

Mulheish (2011) discovered that the quality of early childhood programmes is key to it having the expected benefits. The markedly more positive effect of high quality pre-school over low quality pre-school are shown on maths and English scores as well as 'self-regulation' (that is, the ability to cope with emotions, manage thinking and behaviour and focus attention). It should be noted that the same benefits are not gained from attending low quality pre-school. While quality programmes may cost more (because of higher staff pay, lower ratios and improved facilities), the benefits far outweigh the cost.

Producing tomorrow's workforce

Research confirms that early childhood professionals are a critical component of children's educational experiences and can influence how young children learn, develop, and get along with others. For instance, Chaudhuri & Potepan (2009) asserted that excellent early childhood education ensure that children have the early experiences they need to increase their chances of succeeding in school, reading on grade level, graduating on time, and achieving success in the workforce and in life. Likewise, some researchers have concluded that young children enrolled in pre-school programs usually graduate from high school, attend higher institutions, have fewer behavioural problems, and do not become involved with crime in their adolescent and young adult years (Education Corner, 2016).

Lynch (2007) also reported that children who have received high-quality early care and education are less likely to require special education, to repeat classes while in school and less likely to drop out of high school. Those that graduate are more likely to go on to college while girls are less likely to become pregnant as teenagers. Similarly, as adults, these children are less likely to commit

crimes or become incarcerated. In other words, the more the children that have access to qualitative early childhood education, the more the number of children that proceed to higher institutions of learning, graduate and enter the workforce.

This implies that the best way to improve the Nigerian workforce of the 21st century and beyond is to invest in early education. For the nation to succeed in an increasingly competitive world economy, there is need for skilled and educated workers. Investing in early care and education brings an impressive return on investment, making it a key strategy for children's educational success and the economic vitality of the nation.

Life skills through quality Early Childhood Education

Early childhood is the period from birth to eight years. Quality early learning programmes improve language skills and help reduce the achievement gap to increase kindergarten readiness and early grade success (Birken, 2015). These programmes are significant to our workforce development efforts considering the fact that reading in the third year of the elementary school is the strongest predictor of high school graduation. Reading proficiency in the third year is a critical indicator of high school success. This is because educational experiences before the third year focus on learning to read while beyond the third year, pupils are reading to learn. Pupils who are not able to read by the end of the third year will be challenged to learn the more complex material in fourth year and beyond, and are significantly less likely to graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Preparing the future workforce begins before children enter the primary school system. Investments in early learning are an investment in workforce development. For instance, in a study conducted by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2008, it was reported that children who participate in high quality Early Childhood Education programmes are more likely to have the necessary skills—such as abstract reasoning, problem solving and communication—to meet the demands of tomorrow's workforce.

Robinson (2000) cited in Okoruwa & Soretire (2013) defined employability skills as the skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job. He further categorised these skills into three; basic academic skills (reading, writing, science, mathematics, oral communication and listening), higher order thinking skills (reasoning, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving) and personal skills (responsibility, self-confidence, self-control, honesty, integrity, team spirit, punctuality, well grooming). These are the skills that a qualitative preschool should inculcate in children.

For instance, as children are instructed to be in school early enough for the assembly, they learn the importance of punctuality. Inspection of their dressing, hair and nails also teach them the importance of good grooming. Joining clubs such as Boys' Scout and Red Cross teaches decision making, problem solving, team spirit, creative thinking, responsibility, self confidence and self control. Furthermore, participating in caring for plants on the school farm could teach good work attitude, responsibility and efficiency. Moreover, learning to report their findings on the school farm teach language and communication skills, honesty and integrity. All these show that investing in the provision of quality early childhood education is to provide the building blocks for a strong foundation for tomorrow's workforce and leaders.

Importance of Qualitative Teacher Education Programmes

It is not enough to demand high-quality education for young children without ensuring that educators have a strong foundation in early childhood education, child development and learning when they graduate from higher education programmes, as well as ensuring that ongoing professional development opportunities are in place. This is because the educators are the ones that plan children's learning experiences. They determine the success or otherwise of the curriculum.

High professional preparation standards ought to be sustained, therefore, so that students who commit to careers in the early childhood profession develop into teachers with the skills and knowledge to build engaging settings and create rich learning experiences for children.

Conclusion

As time goes on, the Nigerian economy would require an even more highly educated and skilled workforce than it does today. The cost of allowing even some children to fail in school and later in life is unacceptably high. One of the surest ways to avoid the economic costs and lost opportunities such failure brings is to make sure that all children have opportunity and access to quality early childhood Education, which would enable them enter school fully prepared to succeed. Efforts to improve Early Childhood Education are an investment not a cost since high-quality early care and education has been shown to be one of the most cost-effective ways to expand the capacity and productivity of the future workforce as well as guarantee that more children are able to learn the skills they will need for success in school and later life.

Recommendations

In view of the importance of quality Early Childhood Education in preparing the needed productive and skilful workforce for the nation, the following recommendations are made:

- * Government investment in high-quality Early Childhood Education should be increased. High-quality facilities in terms of infrastructures and learning materials should be provided and maintained to improve the quality of early childhood education, particularly in the public schools. This is because high quality is necessary in order to realize high returns. The net benefits for investing in high-quality Early Childhood Education offer one of the highest returns of any public investment.
- * The Early Childhood Education workforce should be educated, trained, and adequately compensated. Only through raising salary levels can more qualified and educated professionals enter and remain in this field. New and current educators must be trained in order to upgrade their skills. Institutions of higher learning also need to prepare to meet this critical need.
- * Parents and teachers should be good role models to children so that through their examples children can acquire skills such as punctuality, responsibility, good grooming and self control which could help prepare them for a more productive future.
- * In addition to core subjects in the curriculum, clubs and societies such as Boys' Scout and Red Cross should be introduced to children in school early, so that they can develop team spirit, self confidence, creative thinking and decision making skills which would help prepare them for their career in later life.
- * Efforts should be made to increase awareness at all levels and in all sectors of society that early childhood education has an important role to play in laying the foundations for children's future career. This would discourage parents from denying their children the benefits of Early Childhood Education by not enrolling them in school early.
- * Support and funding for research on the socio-economic benefits of early childhood education should be increased.
- * Early Childhood Education should be made available and accessible to all children, particularly the disadvantaged children in the rural areas.

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