

Overcoming Challenges to Successful Implementation of Early Childhood Care Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Education remains an indispensable tool as far as human and societal development are concerned. Moreover, among the other levels of education, the Early Childhood Care and Education is the bedrock and foundation upon which subsequent knowledge is built and developed. It is therefore imperative that proper attention should be given to education at this level. It is however evident that in Nigeria the implementation of Early Childhood Care Education is faced with enormous challenges. The paper therefore, examined these challenges which include; dearth of trained teachers and proprietors, lack of facilities and teaching equipment, language problem, non-implementation of the curriculum, bad teaching methodology, non-use of modern technology and government lack of involvement and supervision of the programme. The ways these challenges affect the children, the teachers and the nation at large were discussed and solutions were proffered to enhance effective implementation of Early Childhood care and Education in Nigeria.

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Introduction

The future of a nation's socio-economic and political well-being lies with the quality of children's education because they are the future leaders. If they have a weak foundation when it comes to education, it will surely affect their lives when they are adults and in turn affect the nation's well-being. It is in this regard that Oguntuasi (2010) noted that in all human existence, no matter the location or period, people have always involved in ensuring the young ones all round development and their harmonious fitting into the wider society. For a sound education system therefore, emphasis should be placed on early childhood education as it serves as bedrock and foundation upon which subsequent knowledge and development is built. In their view, Olubadewa, and Olowe, (2011) noted that the early years of children are years of extreme vulnerability and tremendous potentials during which adequate protection, care, stimulation are essential to provide the foundation for the well-being and development of children. It is at this period of childhood that children experience socio-emotional and motor development which they will need for future achievements and social functioning, (Odigie 2018).

There has been an increasing recognition of the early years in life. It is no wonder then that the Jometien World Conference on Education For All, 1990 in its framework for action, drew special attention to the fact that education begins at birth. In Nigeria, the Federal Government in her National Policy on Education (2014) spelt out in clear and unequivocal terms the philosophy and objectives of early childhood/pre-primary education. However, Uduchukwu (2010) has noted with dismay that the implementation of the Early Childhood Care Education programme in some schools, centres and states is yet to be actualized in the federation in terms of adequate adherence to guidelines of standards. She further pointed out that in a pilot survey study of Early Child Care facilities and practices conducted by the National Commission for Colleges of Education in 2004 painted a grim picture of the situation of the early Childhood Development on ground in Nigeria. The major findings of the study include the following:

- Out of 7,534 daycare centres and nursery schools surveyed, 5,494 (80%) were privately owned, while the public (government) owned 1,123 (16.3%)
- A substantial number 5, 164 (75.6%) had government approval.
- There were more nursery schools than daycare centres. Only 1,207 (17.7%) were daycare centres. There were more female teachers/ care-givers.
- Out of the staff in the centres/ schools visited, a substantial number, 3,581 had no formal education.
- Most of the centres/ schools appeared not to be child-friendly and many lacked toilet facilities. Specifically, there were states with more than 1000 pupils per toilet. The best situation was in Cross River State with 74 pupils per toilet.
- Only a small number of centres and schools, 1,990 (24.4%) operated a federal curriculum.
- Majority of the centres/ schools did not have science corners.
- Books, computers, balls, puzzles, bean-bags, tape recorder/ player and radio where among the popular teaching and learning materials found in the centres/ schools.
- Most of the centers/ schools approved claimed that they were regularly supervised by the ministry of education.

(Uduchukwu, 2010: 3-4)

This paper therefore examines the concept of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCE), the provisions of Early Childhood Care and Development Education in the National Policy on Education, the philosophical foundation of ECCE, and the challenges of ECCE in Nigerian and suggests ways of improving the programme in the country.

The Concept of Early Childhood Care and Education/Pre-Primary Education

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is the first stage of education where the foundation for life-long learning and development is laid. There are different names for the various establishments that take care of children at this stage, such names include daycare, crèches, nursery school and the kindergarten. The Global Education Report (2007) confirmed that children's success in life begins in early childhood and investment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has a direct and positive impact on primary school enrolments, retention and completion.

Akinware, (2010) opines that (ECCE) includes early socialization education and readiness for school as well as the provision of basic health care, adequate nutrition, nurturing and stimulation with a caring environment. She further observed that those responsible for Early Childhood Education in Africa underscored its importance in human resources development. This first strand of education she further noted, is based on the fact that the period 3 up to 5 years of age is of supreme importance for emotional, intellectual and social development, that intervention at this stage can have strong and lasting impact on the health and welfare of adults and that opportunities forgone at this stage can rarely be made up for at the later stages.

In line with the above assertion, it is obvious that the first years of a child's life are a crucial developmental period. Children who are nurtured and stimulated during these years are more prepared for formal reading and mathematics, and are more likely to have the social skills they will need when it is time to enter into primary school. Teachers Research Centre (2011) has noted that through research, it is now evident that people from all walks of life majority of whom were not trained in the Early Childhood Education own and manage Early Childhood Education centres. Therefore the quality of early childhood education in Nigeria may be at stake. A proper education in the initial years of child's life is crucial as the learning experience of children up to 5 years play significant role in their achievement later in life. This is because children attend kindergarten to learn to communicate, play and interact with others appropriately. ECCDE therefore gives children the knowledge, values, desires and skills valued in later life. Another role of ECCDE is that for children who previously had spent most of their time at home, kindergarten may serve the purpose of training them to be separated from their parents without much anxiety. They are usually exposed to their first idea and friendship while they play and interact with other children on a regular basis, (Uduchukwu, 2010).

Basic Outlines of National Policy on Education and early Childhood/Primary Education in Nigeria

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004:7), in the National Policy on Education define Early Childhood Care Development and Education as the education given in educational institutions to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, nursery and kindergarten. The objectives/purposes of pre-primary education as provided in the document, section 2 sub-sections 14 and 15 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;
- d) Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the explanation of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys etc;
- e) Inculcate social norms'
- 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. (FRN, 2014:7)

Measures for achieving the objectives were spelt out by the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004:) in the National Policy on Education as follows:

- (a) Set and monitor minimum standard for Early Childhood Care Development and Education centres;
- (b) Develop and disseminate curriculum materials such as Integrated Early Child Care Development (IECD) policy, National Minimum Standard for the establishment of Early Child Care Education Centers, IECD Curriculum, IECD Implementation Guidelines and all other materials that will enhance the implementation of Early Childhood Care and Development and Education.
- (c) Encourage both community and private efforts in the establishment of Early Childhood Care and Development and Education Centres based on set standards,
- (d) Make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early child care and education and for retraining for teachers;

- (e) Ensure that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented towards play-way method;
- (f) Ensure that Early Childhood Care Development and Education Centres adopt the following caregiver/ infant ratios: (i) Crèche 1:10; Nursery 1:25;
- (g) Develop suitable Early Childhood Care Development and Education curriculum for nationwide implementation;
- (h) Supervise and control quality of Early Childhood Care and Development and Education centres;
- (i) Make provisions for the education and effective utilization of learning and instructional materials in adequate numbers and to this end will:
 - Develop the orthography of more Nigerian Languages and
 - Promote textbooks, supplementary readers, and other instructional materials in Nigerian Languages.

The Nigerian Government's Policy Statement on Early Childhood Education highlighted so far is in line with what obtains in most countries. Perhaps the problem with its actualization lies with its manner of implementation. The questions then are what are the challenges to a successful implementation of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria and how do we overcome them?

Overcoming Challenges of Early Childhood Care Education in Nigeria

The importance of quality Early Child Care Development and Education cannot be overemphasized as it helps to stimulate children to develop their potentials and promote their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. It therefore follows that every child should have the opportunity to acquire a strong foundation for his education. Unfortunately it appears that in Nigeria, the Early Childhood Education is bedeviled with many challenges which hinder its effective implementation. This paper is aimed at overcoming some of the challenges to the successful implementation of this level of education in Nigeria under the following sub-headings;

(a) Dearth of qualified and motivated Teachers:

A major issue that constitutes a challenge to Early Childhood Education in Nigeria is the quality and commitment of teachers and caregivers at this level of education. Obianuju, (2007) has noted with dismay that schools are staffed with teachers with little or no qualification and experience on Early Childhood Care and Education. He further observed that privately owned pre-primary schools engage mostly secondary school leavers as teachers. Oguntuasi, (2010) has argued that private proprietors of pre-primary schools engage unqualified teachers to teach the children in order to minimize cost involved in the payment of staff salaries.

This practice of course undermines the Nigerian Government Policy of ensuring adequate training of staff of pre-primary institutions. It is in this regard that Laleye, (2015) opined that the ability to attain the level of aspired quality education in order to achieve the objectives of human development depends entirely on the qualification and experience of teachers, who are the custodian of education. He also noted that teachers are crucial inputs of any educational system because they have the command of the knowledge and skill to impart to the learners. Hence the quality of teachers at the pre-primary education determines largely the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Ogbu, (2004:162) in his view emphasized that teachers are the main determinant of quality in education and are expected to be effective and committed. Effective and qualified teachers are consistently obtaining good results from students/ learners, while ineffective and unqualified teachers produce low learning growth. Therefore, a quality teacher without doubt is an effective teacher.

A trained teacher at the pre-primary level of education, for instance, should be able to utilize resources and improvise teaching materials to stimulate the child through play. They should identify children with special needs for referrals, discuss the needs, progress and development of the child with parents and assist the child to acquire desirable attributes like good morals, norms and values. The children are still developing at this stage thus; they need teachers groomed in child psychology which would provide the platform to handle them in instructional processes. Trained teachers at this level of education will acquaint themselves with latest and most innovatively effective teaching methodologies to early childhood professionals the world over. The teacher of nursery schools should also possess some desirable qualities such as being friendly with children and tolerant with them.

Closely related to the problem of untrained teachers at the pre-primary level of education in Nigeria is the issue of teachers' devotion to duty. In a research carried out by Ahiazu and Odigie (2018) in Rivers State of Nigeria, their findings show that a good number of these teachers have been crippled with poor condition of service and irregular payment of salaries. This situation makes them to be disillusioned and less committed to their job. Besides, the caregivers perform their duty with lukewarm attitude. A motivated caregiver/ teacher will go a long way to actualize effective implementation of the National Policy on Education. The positive support the children receive from their caregivers, but where the opposite is the case, the child gets traumatized and may be afraid to attend school. The child develops a phobia towards schooling in future.

Ogbu, (2004) has noted that teacher's motivation is anything done to make teachers happy, satisfied, dedicated and committed in such a way that they will bring out their best in the classroom so that both pre-schoolers, parents and society will greatly benefit from their services. It is thus evident that motivation of teachers influences teachers' performance. This is not surprising as the motivated teacher can sacrifice anything in-order to have a

quality pre-schooler.

From the above discussions, it is imperative therefore that all stakeholders of pre-school education in Nigeria should motivate the teachers in one way or the other. This will arouse the teachers' interest to do their work effectively. It is equally important to create an attractive salary scale which will provide incentives that would retain the best minds in the profession. The issue of inadequate trained pre-school teachers and caregivers will be solved when the government trains more pre-primary teachers since presently the stipulated teacher – pupil ratio of 1:25 as stated in the Policy document is not attainable due to the fact that new pre-primary centres now mushroom all over the states in Nigeria, there should also be provision for retraining of caregivers and pre-school teachers by exposing them to workshops, conferences and other viable programmes to enable them acquire mastery experiences to lead and teach the children better. This will also prevent stagnation of knowledge.

(b) Lack of Facilities and Equipment

Effective teaching and learning process usually take place in a conducive environment with adequate provision of spacious, well-ventilated classroom space, tables, chairs, instructional materials, play materials and toilet facilities for pre-schoolers. However, most of these facilities are lacking in most nursery and pre-primary institutions in Nigeria. Early childhood education as Obianuju, (2007) noted is now a lucrative business that anybody can embark on as long as you have the resources to rent or buy a house. These schools are often located in noisy and unhealthy environments with limited open spaces for children to play and exercise their limbs. This situation on ground for most nursery schools is not conducive for young children to learn.

For instance, Nyeche, (2016) has observed that most nursery schools lack adequate toilet facilities for the pre-schoolers, the classrooms are small in size and often crowded. Thus the sitting arrangement does not provide space for movement of teachers and pre-schoolers. This situation of crowded classrooms greatly limit quality interaction between the teacher and the pupils. Where classrooms are spacious, both the children and the teacher will interact better and freer in most of their activities making way for better learning outcome. To solve this problem, proprietors of pre-school institutions should adhere closely to government stipulations on establishment of nursery schools in Nigeria. The government apart from making policies, should build more schools and set down policies to guide their operations. This would drastically reduce the problem of crowded classroom in the pre-school sector.

Again, instructional materials which are indispensable tools in the teaching and learning process are lacking and inadequate in most nursery schools in Nigeria. These are tools the teacher uses in the classroom to make his/her lesson interesting and easily understood by pre-schoolers. Schwartz, (2016) noted that topics are designed to be taught so as to achieve the stated learning objectives but if appropriate instructional materials like audio-visual aids, white board, toys are lacking or are not used at all, the pre-schoolers find it difficult to understand. Also instructional materials help to sustain the interest of the learner. It is in this regard that Nkem, and Nyeche, (2016:20) have stated that "it is destructive for caregivers to deliver instructions without instructional materials." Also some of the teaching materials like nursery rhymes, songs and toys used in most pre-primary schools are foreign to the Nigerian nursery school children. There is the need to teach according to the culture and environment of the children for easy understanding of the concept being taught. In this regard, Mkpa, (1999:52) succinctly put it that "method and practice cannot be divorced from the social-cultural milieu." Therefore the government should encourage research in the production of affordable local toys and game materials to facilitate teaching and learning at this level of education.

Ahiazu, and Odigie, (2018) in their research noted that nursery schools in urban centres can boast of substantial quantity of didactic materials for children to explore nature, the environment, art and music. On the other hand, nursery schools in rural areas are scantily equipped with didactic materials and thus stifling impression which the children can make of the world by exploring these materials. The above problems associated with lack of facilities and equipment in our nursery schools can also be solved when quality assurance in nursery schools in the various Local Government Areas in Nigeria is vigorously pursued by the state government by monitoring the nursery schools in the Local Government Areas to ensure they maintain standards.

(C) The Language Problem

The importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and preserving of the cultures of a people has long been recognized by the Nigerian Government. Thus the Nigeria National Policy on Education, the Federal Government of Nigeria, (2014) has clearly stated that the medium of instruction at the pre-primary level is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community. Apart from preserving native language and culture a child's mother-tongue will help to promote childhood literacy. This is because children tend to learn faster in the language of their immediate environment and mother-tongue, (Obanya, 2007).

The implementation of the policy of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction at the pre-primary education in Nigeria is still a mirage as Obinaju, (2007) asserted that quite a number of pre-primary education teachers cannot fluently speak the language of their immediate environment, talkless of using it as a medium of instruction. Again Ogbu, (2004) has noted that as far as the use of mother-tongue is concerned, the value of parents and their preference towards the use of English Language in the education of their children at this stage conflicts with those of the policy makers. Parents' choice of English language is because of the added advantage English Language

has on the child's future education. In order to satisfy the parents' wish, the proprietors and teachers of pre-primary schools tend to ignore the policy statement on the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction and rather teach in foreign language. The problem is that at this pre-primary education stage, the child is battling to learn his or her mother-tongue and at the same time a foreign language. This often brings confusion to the child and equally slows down his learning pace, (Obanya, 2007). In other words, instead of acculturation into the child's culture, what takes place is enculturation into other people's culture.

Another factor militating against the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the nursery level is the Federal Government's slow pace at developing the orthography of many more Nigerian languages and produce text books in Nigerian languages for use at the pre-primary school level. This delay is not unconnected with the fact that there is multiplicity of dialects all over the federation. However it is still possible to infuse the local cultures in the pre-schoolers through the use of play, music, games, stories in the day to day activities of Early Childhood Care Education.

(D) The Proprietors of Early Childhood Care Centres.

It is pertinent to note that nursery education in Nigeria has become a very lucrative venture. Ogbu, (2004) observed that there is an unprecedented explosion in provision of child care and pre-primary education institutions in Nigeria. With the possible exception of few nursery schools established by the government, some universities and colleges of education, the remaining multitude of pre-primary schools are owned and run by private organizations and individuals.

Most proprietors of these schools from all walks of life are not trained teachers in early childhood education. Often in order to make profits, these proprietors employ the services of untrained, uncommitted teachers and caregivers who are poorly paid. Also most facilities and instructional materials which make for effective teaching and learning are lacking at these pre-school centres. Some proprietors even design their own curriculum. The question then is to what extent are the owners of these early childhood education centres preparing Nigerian children for the next stage of education? There is no doubt that with such a situation on ground, the quality of early childhood education in Nigeria may be at stake.

It is pertinent therefore, that there is need for enhanced government commitment through dedicated budgeting for Early Childhood Care Education and enhanced partnership with the private sector. Also appropriate legislation should be put in place to ensure that only people who have relevant qualification in the Early Care Education are allowed to own and manage pre-primary schools. There should be standard guidelines regarding the operation of Early Childhood Centres, which should be produced by the government and made available to qualified people wishing to operate Early Childhood Education in rural areas and urban centres. This will enhance standard in the operation of Early Child Care Education.

(E) The Curriculum and Methodology

The curriculum designed for pre-primary education in Nigeria is often not adhered to. Most pre-schoolers' teachers prefer to teach the children contents based on societal needs which are above pre-schoolers' knowledge/ cognitive level. Obanya, (2007) had noted that because of the prevailing mindset among many parents and caregivers that Early Childhood Education should be geared strictly towards academic head start at the primary level, there is an undue emphasis on orthodox pedagogy or what she called frontal teaching. This involves frequent testing, over-loaded home work, assignment, competition and rote learning which tend to stress and strain the young children.

In his view Akinware (2010) had argued that the present curriculum in use in Nigeria pre-primary education system rates as well as those in use in any developed countries of the world. However he pointed out that the problem with the programme is therefore not with the quality of the document but with its manner of implementation. To overcome this challenge associated with non-uniform application of the pre-primary curriculum, all proprietors of nursery schools must strictly adhere to the government recommended curriculum. This could be achieved by ensuring that teachers submit their notes of lesson for vetting before they use them to teach. Also government officials and supervisors should undertake both routine and casual checks on these pre-primary school centres to ensure that there is uniformity in the use of the curriculum.

Another challenge to the implementation of Early Childhood Education is the use of wrong methodology by the teachers and caregivers. In this regard, Odigie, (2018) opined that in most cases the correct teaching methods are not being applied in most pre-primary schools. Some teachers do not follow the policy recommendation of using stories, play-way method, toys e.t.c. in teaching and learning processes. Instead they resort to the use of lecture method which makes the learning materials abstract and difficult for the children to understand at their level. In other words the children do not learn because of bad teaching methods used which do not arouse and sustain their interest. The lecture method used by most pre-primary teachers negates the main purpose pre-primary education which according to Akinware (2010) is to give children the opportunity to learn to play together to gain self-confidence. The children will also sing and recite poems which will improve their speech.

Teachers' use of instructional materials equally influences pre-primary education. This is because the use of instructional materials stimulates the child's senses which lead to greater understanding of the content being taught. In other words learning takes place when the greatest number of senses are stimulated. Thus Schwartz (2016) has

stressed that if appropriate instructional materials are not used, the pre-schooler finds it difficult to understand. But when appropriate instructional materials are designed and used they help learners to learn better and teachers to teach better.

The problems discussed above, can be solved when proprietors of pre-schools make sure that teachers adopt play-way method, story-telling, songs, music, dance and appropriate instructional materials in their teaching. It is also suggested that the government should compile and produce an anthology of Nigerian and African songs, stories, games, poems, riddles and tongue twister in form of Handbook for parents and caregivers. Such materials would have direct relationship to Nigerian cultural values.

(F) Government Involvement In The Implementation and Control of Early Childhood in Nigeria.

The federal Government of Nigeria (2014) in The National Policy on Education talks of Early Childhood Care and Education as the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children from 0 -4 years in a crèche or nursery, but falls short of making it a responsibility of the government. Olubadewa, and Olowe, (2011), Obanya, (2007) and Odigie, (2018) have observed that most nursery schools in Nigeria are owned by private individuals, cooperative bodies and organizations. The government policy to regulate and control the operations of these schools have not been achieved because of the dearth of qualified inspectors, large number of illegal pre-schools and lack of political will. This makes it easy for most nursery schools to operate a poor standard as highlighted in earlier sections of this paper. For a successful implementation of the Early Childhood Care Education, the Government should be the principal investor in the programme, by expanding and improving it especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Such a key role cannot be left entirely to the private sector. This is because human resource development involves long-term planning and large financial resources which only the government is capable of mobilizing.

Modern Teachers and their use of Information and Communication Technology in Early Childhood Education

It is an undeniable fact that modern technology has been playing a great role in improving all aspects of human life of which education is not an exception. Laleye, (2015) noted that rapid changes in technology has introduced new approaches in education. It has brought about new ways of doing old things in both education and economic life of the society. Technology has indeed made it possible to simplify many aspects of teaching and learning especially in language studies.

Moreover the quest for development in Nigeria makes it imperative for trainers/ teachers to shift from the existing method of teaching like the use of chalkboard and textbook to accommodate the use of technologies. Hence preparing teachers for the challenges of a changing world means equipping them with effective teaching practices and understanding the use of modern technologies and ability to apply them in teaching learning process. In this regard, Akabogu, (2008) maintained that in this ICT dominated era, teachers must be ready to step into the status quo as well as to advance the teaching profession by infusing technology into their teaching. Thus David, (2007:15) rightly opined that “children cannot be effective in tomorrow’s world if they are trained in yesterday’s skills”.

It is therefore very necessary that Early Childhood Caregivers should use some elements of technology like audio-visual equipment. To this end the Government of Manitoba, (1986) had advised that if technology materials like television programmes, movies, videos and computer softwares are used, they must be culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate, with no violent, frightening or sexually explicit content. Useful materials to be used at this level of learning include;

- Videos of a story that is considered children’s literature,
- Computer software that has educational content in introducing concepts such as numbers, colour matching and shapes,
- Videos showing familiar things and objects in the curricular and which are of interest to children.

The use of ICT in Early Childhood Care Education has its challenges especially in Nigeria as Akabogu, (2008) has noted the following problems;

- High cost of ICT infrastructure
- Lack of access to internet
- High cost to the consumer of ICT services
- Unsteady and inadequate electrical power supply
- Lack of skilled manpower as most pre-school teachers and caregivers are not computer literate.

It then follows that if Information and Communication Technology is to be used in the pre-primary centres in Nigeria, teachers and Caregivers must be trained in modern technology. Proprietors of nursery schools and pre-primary education centres must equip their centres with audio-visual materials and the government should provide funds and partner with the private sector in providing these costly teaching equipment. This is necessary because when these modern technologies are used by teachers, teaching / learning become more interesting and effective.

Conclusion

Education is an indispensable tool in the integration of an individual into the society irrespective of the age, location and social background because it enlightens, liberates and prepares one for useful living in the society. To this end all hands must be on deck to ensure the full implementation of Early Childhood Education programme in Nigeria. The government has a key role to play in the areas of ensuring quality assurance of the programme. In this sense, there should be regular inspection of nursery schools to ensure they meet government standards in the provision of teaching facilities, equipment and trained teachers. The government should also partner with the proprietors of pre-primary education centres and where possible grant them fund in aid to ensure effective implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education in Nigeria.

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