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AN APPRAISAL OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION ((ECCE) IN NIGERIA: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is essential because it boosts children's perception, physical, mental, linguistic, emotional, social and intellectual development. As laudable as this is for the child, the program seems to be available to just but a few children in Nigeria. This paper examines the implementation policy of ECCE. First, it gives a brief background information about the development of ECCE in the country, pointing out its purpose, achievements made so far and its current challenges. Secondly, it highlights the challenges in policy implementation of ECCE program. Finally, the paper concludes by giving some recommendations: the Government should provide adequate facilities, fund and encourage teacher training programmes in this field as the way forward.

Introduction

In every modern society, it is believed that education is the key to the nations development and so there is the need to maintain every level of education, especially the pre-primary stage, because it is the bedrock upon which all other educational levels are built. Once a child misses this early stage it is usually very difficult for the learner to cope with later educational tasks. Pre-primary education is very common in most modern societies, they make provision for early childhood education programmes of various types of children below the

official school age of six (6) years, mainly to prepare them for the rigors of primary education and beyond.

Although some scholars are not in support of early childhood Education, for example Robinson and Robinson, (1968) holds the view that young children are not mature to learn complex task or skills that are required of them in the pre-school programs. They also argue that love and warmth of a mother are more important to the child at this stage than any educational program. Research evidences shown by other scholars, revealed that any childhood education has a positive influence on children's, affective, conceptual and social development in later years (Baker, 1973; Rolnick and Grunawald. 2003: Gormley, Gayet. Philips and Dawson, 2005).

Despite the different views on early childhood education by scholars. the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) stipulates that it should be included in the mainstream education. Formal education begins from pre-primary education as provided in day care centres and nursery schools for children aged 0 - 5years which makes them ready for school.

Although the government is not directly involved in the establishment of day-care centre and nursery schools, it creates an enabling environment and maintains an oversight functions for:

1. provision and distribution of policy guideline for the establishment and manage of pre-primary institutions.
2. Production and development of appropriate National Curriculum and textbooks in some Nigerian Languages.
3. Approval of relevant supplementary reading materials and teachers instructional manuals
4. Provision and approval of appropriate clarification of work done and training received.

As laudable as these national policies are, it is faced with some challenges in its implementation.

Brief Background information about the development of ECCE in Nigeria

Early childhood Education or pre-primary Education is defined by the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) as an education given to a child in an educational settings for children aged 3-5years in preparing them for entry into primary school. It includes, "Ota, akara", crèche, kindergarten, etc. Early childhood education can be traced to the efforts of some prominent European educationist, like, J.J. Rouseau (1782-1788), John Amos Comerins (1590-1690), Johann Heinrisch Pestalozzi (1748-1827), Friedrich Froebel (1751- 1782). These experts championed the right of children to early education. Many educationist and scholars, including Maduwesi (1992) and Fafunwa (1967) supported and advocated for the views held by these earlier educationist that there is need for good early childhood education to help learners develop their full potentials.

The history of early childhood care and education in Nigeria dates back to 1816 by Robert Owen. During that time, working mothers gathered their children under the custody of caregivers, while at the same time they taught them various activities that stimulated their development. The women were providing these services without any pay. Again, the need for ECCE program has been associated with modernization which brought with it the disintegration of the traditional social set up in which the extended family was the basic unit within which children were cared for and socialized. The rise of the nuclear family (in which both parents may be in employment) and the single parent family (in which case the head of the family had to fend for the children) necessitated the establishment of a secondary institution of socialization to play the role that was played by the extended family before. ECCE was seen as a handy substitute.

As time went by, the need arose for educational planners, administrators, policy makers as at then the military governments of Nigeria realized the need for pre-primary education in the country and gave an official recognition to it in the National Policy on Education (1977) and revised 1981, 1998, subsequently revised again under the civilian governments in 2004, 2007, and 2012. The operational objectives of pre-primary education as stated in the National Policy on Education (FRN 2012) include.

- (I) Effecting a smooth transmission from the home to the school.
- (II) Preparing the child for the primary level of education.
- (III) Providing adequate care and supervision for children while their parents are at work.
- (IV) Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiring and creativity through the exploration of nature and environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.
- (V) Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit.
- (vi) Inculcating social norms.
- (vii) Learn good habits, especially good health habits and
- (viii) Teaching rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc. through play.

Policy Guidelines for Implementation

As contained in the NPE (2012) the implementation guidelines stated by the government in order to achieve the objectives are:

To establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community and private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.

- a. To make provision in teacher education programs for specialization in early pre- primary education.

- b. To ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and to this end will:
 - (i) Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages and
 - (ii) Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages.
- c. To ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education. To this end the teacher, pupil ration shall be 1:25.
- d. Set and monitor minimum standard for early childhood centres in the country and
- e. Ensure full participation of government, communities and teacher associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities (FRN, 2012).

From the foregoing, while the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) specifies the guidelines for operating pre-primary education in Nigeria, it did not specify the care and support requirements for children from 0 to 3 years of age. This is a major gap that has left the operation of early childhood care and pre-primary education more in the hands of private operators without adequate guidelines or standards. Looking at the policy guidelines provided by the government, it only provides an "enabling environment" for private players, communities and non-governmental organizations. This position, however raises a number of questions, one of which is what capacity and capability do these players have to provide ECCE such that the latter play a significant role in improving access to ECCE and addressing rural-urban disparities? Private players do not establish their "businesses" with social goals high on their list of priorities; instead they are concerned with generating profit. Where they choose to cite their centres is always a function of profit opportunities. Again the high fees they charged only make such schools accessible to only children of the rich. The comprehensive education analysis jointly undertaken by Nigeria's Federal Government, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1997 revealed the enormity of this problem and underscored the urgent need for government action to provide adequate policy provision for child health care and educational programme to enhance early childhood education. Again, a pilot study of early childhood care facilities and practices by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and UNICEF, as well as the educational sector analysis by the Federal Ministry of Education., UNESCO and other development partners such as DFID, USAID. World Bank and JICA further painted a grim picture of the situation at hand.

In August 2004, the NERDC With the support from UNICEF convened a meeting of experts and stakeholders in early child care to agree on the minimum standard for operating childhood care centres in an integrated way in Nigeria. This effort resulted in the production of what is today the National Minimum Standards for Early Childcare centres in Nigeria.

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 protection are crucial in the formation and development of intelligence, personality and social behavior multi-sector pursuit, covering interventions in health, nutrition care, stimulation, protection Over the years, early children in Nigeria have changed from a single sector approach to and participation of the child.

Purpose of Pre-Primary Education

A general consensus among psychologists, sociologist and biologist, is that the early years (0-5years) is a critical period in the life of a child. This is because the rate of development in physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language is usually very rapid. As a result, once a high level of stability is attained in cognitive, effective and behavioural dimension, significant change is difficult to occur in later years of the child. Similarly, when damage on impoverishment suffered at this stage is likely to be irreparable. In like manner, finding of various developmental psychologist like Piaget, Walter V.M. (1976), Walter B.K. (1963), Denga (2002) and Nnachi (2003) have proved beyond reasonable doubt that the first few wears of a child's life has a great influence on the future capabilities of the child. In addition to the above, current children programmes analyst are encouraged by child friendly organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, NERDC, UBE who all affirmed that the early years (0-5years) are critical to the growth and development of the child. These opinions are a confirmation that the care and support that parents, teachers and other stakeholders give to children from infancy to late childhood are critical in promoting the all- round development of the child. It is not in doubt that the care and stimulation that children experience at these early stages of growth and development are good foundations for subsequent development and attainment in all developmental domains.

Another importance of pre-primary school (s) as summarized by UNCSEO (1995) are stated below:

- i. Enables children to improve on their self confidence since they are given opportunity to interact with their peers and adults too.
- ii. Helps to curb aggressive tendencies in children during group plays or activities by ensuring that they interact cordially with their peers and adults, this helps to widen their scope of understanding of group dynamics.
- iii. It enables the child to feel free to interact with other people outside his immediate family environment.
- iv. It permits a smooth transition from home to school.
- v. It sharpens the child's cognitive domains through learning of rhymes and songs while playing on slides and swings help in physical development and build their muscles.

While structured plays with building blocks of puzzles, baby dolls and teddy bears helps in emotional development of the children.

- vi. It assists working class parents who have no relation or house help to take care of their child while they are at work.
- vii. It exposes children to reading and writing at an early stage of life and hence tend to remain in primary school and beyond and do achieve good results too.

Challenges in policy implementation of ECCE in Nigeria

The goals of Nigerian government as stipulated in the National Policy Development's plan to pre-primary education was meant to be distributed effectively, but it fell short of this in its implementation.

One major challenge faced by the Federal Government's decision in its policy implementation was in the area of granting permission to private organizations. Government left the whole of this in the hands of private organizations. This has adversely affected the quality of ECCE. For example, currently most pre-primary centres do not comply to standards, existing literatures shows that some centres lack proper structures, such as toilets,

Overcrowded in the classes as against the 1:25 pupils ratio in one class, thereby compromising standards. Presently there are many ill-equipped substandard pre-primary schools scattered all over the country. This is as a result of lack of supervision and inspection to ensure that standard and quality are maintained. It is assumed that with the amount of money being charged by these more or less commercial centres that the facilities should be of high standards but the reverse is the case. Therefore, there is a need for the government (Federal, State and Local Government) to put in measures in place to ensure standards is because as highlighted earlier in this paper that pre-primary education is the bedrock for a smooth transition of children to other levels of education.

The secondly, challenge is in the provision of trained and specialized teachers ECCE. Unfortunately, government has not been able to do much in this area, whether in the public or private teacher training institutions in Nigeria. Until recently, most tertiary institutions in Nigeria teacher education B.Ed programs that will lead the graduates to teach only in the primary and secondary schools and in specialized subject areas other than childhood education. Such specialized in early childhood education are few and because of low status and wages paid to them as well as lack of job security associated with this private Institutions has made specialized in the area not to continue in the field.

Thirdly, the NPE (2012) stipulates that the medium of communication in early childhood centres shall be primarily the learners' mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment/community and orthography and production of textbooks in Nigeria languages.

However, ironically, in most pre-primary schools in Nigeria the medium of instruction is principally the English Language. As far as mother tongue instruction is concerned, Emenanjo (2001) notes that the value attached to native language as regards to protection, preservation and promotion of Nigerian culture as well as its roles in promoting inter-ethnic unity that enhances human dignity and subsequently helps promote national unity and integration in the country is yet to be justified. The use of English for a child to the neglect of his mother tongue is still a serious challenge in Nigeria and has a negative influence on the child's cultural background contrary to protecting it as enshrined in the policy document. Linked to this challenge, is the challenge that most enlighten parents want their children to be immersed into the English language as early as possible because according to them that the perceived advantages and belief that knowledge of English language accelerates the learning process for children entering the primary and other levels of education. However, Fafunwa (1984) has established that if children are taught with their mother tongue, they learn and develop faster intellectually, cognitively and psychologically. One may be left to ask these pertinent questions; does it mean that these teachers do not speak their own native language? Secondly, how can we promote our culture?

Fourthly, the NPE (2012) states that the method of instruction at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum or teacher education is orientated to achieve this. However, as a result of government inability to regulate and control the establishment and operation of pre-primary in the County, Some schools employ teachers who are neither trained to teach nor know-how to handle or relate with children. Moreover there is no standard curriculum to guide their activities. This has given room to people without the prerequisite teaching pedagogy (method) to fill the classes and has caused children to lose interest in education as they (teachers) are unable to present the teaching and learning experiences to children in a stimulating Sequential and logical manner as observed by Robinson and Robinson (1968).

Lastly, the NPE (2012) states that the funding of education at this level shall be a collective effort and responsibility of the three tiers of government (Federal, State and Local Government), but it has been observed that government provides only enabling environment individuals. This has posed a great challenge in the provision of ECCE to the majority of in its operation, leaving its financing purely in the hands of private Organizations and charged by these private operators. It is observed that the only time government financed Nigerian children with only but a few children whose parents can afford the high fees education at this level was through the Early Child Care (ECC) project of the NERDC which was founded through the collaboration of UNICEF and Federal Government of Nigeria and other international I agencies prior to 2001 (Maduewesis, 2001).

The way forward

Despite the challenges discussed above, there should be effective implementation strategies not just a policy on paper. If ECCE is to be of benefit to the Nation, the government should ensure that necessary educational facilities are made available in both rural and urban

areas through the various departments of the Ministry of Education, and there should be effective monitoring, supervision and inspection of ECCE facilities. If any of the private organizations does not meet the national standards or specification for pre-primary schools, then such school should be closed down and her license be revoked until the owner meet the qualifications and set standards to maintain effective pre-primary education.

The federal government in conjunction with tertiary institutions of education and colleges of education should take positive steps to produce adequate specialists in ECCE. This will help in the pedagogy and ensuring a proper development and implementation of ECCE curriculum. In addition, the federal, state and local government should run ECCE schools to curtail the excesses of private practitioners and ensure that they charge a subsidized rate of fees even in the face of the current global recession as there is no alternative to education.

Government should ensure that the pre-primary school proprietors implement the policy statement on the medium of instruction in their institutions to maintain the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as a medium of instruction. To support this implementation, government should encourage and facilitate the writing of textbooks in most of the Nigerian languages beyond the so-called three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). This will enhance the children's cultural (identity) development. Government Should ensure the main method of teaching in ECCE centres is through Montessori-play way method and that the curriculum of teachers training colleges or institutes is orientated to achieve this.

Lastly, there should be a large scale research on care for children of age 0-5years in the country to explore the reality, challenges as well as map out better ways of moving forward the ECCE programme in Nigeria.

Conclusion

it is evident in this paper that pre-primary schools have a positive influence on a child educational background in later life, therefore, the National Policy statement should effectively implemented to achieve and maintain its goals and objectives. For this to be made possible, the government should provide adequate facilities, fund and encourage teacher training programs in ECCE.

Again, there should be effective control of the approval for the establishment of nursery schools which should have specific building plans and should be monitored to ensure that such school are established according to the prescribed standards. The facilities should inspected, monitored, and adequately maintained before pupils are admitted into the school. These facilities should be inspected before pupils are admitted into the schools, monitored and maintained to ensure quality.

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