

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL POLICY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Sesugh Simeon Jem

*Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies,
University of Agriculture,
Makurdi.*

Terngu Eunice Moze

*Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies,
University of Agriculture,
Makurdi.*

And

Emmanuel M. Nyamgee

*Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies,
University of Agriculture,
Makurdi.*

Abstract

Children constitute great future human resource assets of nations. They need quality education to effectively serve the future. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is an important programme that gives children the opportunity they need in their formative years. It lays a strong foundation for their future learning. This paper in view of the significance of ECCE as a palliative to the dwindling fortune of education in Nigeria examines contemporary realities of its implementation in the light of provisions made in the National Policy on Education (NPE) on its administration in the country. The paper adopted content analysis as its methodology in its discussion. It also discusses other relevant issues that reflect on the future of ECCE in Nigeria. The paper concludes by making recommendations to enhance quality delivery of ECCE in Nigeria.

Key Words: National policy on Education, Early childhood, Care, Education, Implementation, Nigeria

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is given in educational institutions to children below the age of six years stipulated for entry into primary school in Nigeria. Sooter (2013) observes that, this level of education is necessary because children at this age are in their formative years where proper educational preparation can be very impactful. ECCE prepares children at this stage for later successes in school. Obidikwe (2012) cited in Tor-Anyiin (2008) states that various forms of arrangements and childhood education programmes are provided in countries to take care of pre-primary school-going children to make them ready for primary school.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) cognisant of the importance of ECCE has made provisions for it in section 2 subsection 11- 14 of the National Policy on Education (NPE). The provisions aim at enhancing the adjustment and development of the child and a significant step in the efforts towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) and the Education for All (EFA) goals.

The essence of Early childhood care and education is well established in section 2 subsection 13 (a)- (h) of the National Policy on Education (NPE) as pre-primary education that shall smoothen transition from the home to the school; prepare the child for primary level of education; provide adequate care and supervision of the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, etc); inculcate social norms; inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc; develop a sense of cooperation and teamwork.

This level of education shall help children to learn good habits, especially good health habits and also teach children rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, and so on through play. To achieve the above requires quality resource provisions as well as good management of facilities for effective delivery of ECCE in Nigeria. This forms the thrust of this paper as it addresses the issue of how well the NPE provisions on ECCE are effectively complied with for effective results. The paper defines ECCE, its evolution in Nigeria, provisions of the NPE towards transforming early childhood care and education. It also discusses the practical realities of ECCE implementation in Nigeria including its prospects. Suggestions for effective implementation of ECCE in Nigeria are also made.

Meaning of Early Childhood Care and Education

There are diverse meanings of early childhood care and education. Adebisi (2010) states that early childhood care and education refers to a wide range of programmes all aimed at the physical, cognitive, social development of children before they enter primary school; theoretically from birth to five years. The definition of early childhood care and education contained in the NPE consider early childhood care and education to be education given in educational institutions to children prior to their entering the primary school. This includes the Creche, the Nursery and the Kinergarten

(FRN, 2014). This means that early childhood care and education is pre-primary education.

Evolution of Early Childhood Care and Education in Nigeria

The origin of early childhood care and education in Nigeria is traceable to the 1887 ordinance which introduced the 2-year infant classes in Nigeria (Tor-Anyiin, 2008). Increased urbanisation, rise in number of civil servants and the middle class as well as businessmen with ability to pay for special training of their children further raised the demand for early childhood care and education. began to rise. The number of pre-primary schools also began to grow. Misra (2008) adds that, the global increases in the incidence of one-parent pupils and other factors relating to family disorderliness, as well as participation of women in the labour force have greatly influenced the demand for early childhood care and education.

By the 1970's, and early 1980's when the economy was buoyant, these special schools increased the more. Agbe (2015) points out that, when the Universal Primary Education (UPE) was introduced in 1976, treatment of teachers began to decline. This led to increased strikes in primary schools that triggered teachers and other civil servants to open more pre-primary schools in both urban and rural areas in the country. Early childhood care and education in Nigeria was largely a post-colonial development as little was done by the colonial government to support this sector before independence. Specifically, attention to early childhood care and education in Nigeria began to feature prominently in 1977 when the government began to acknowledge the influence of the educational programmes on educational performances in primary school. By 1985, Nigeria had 4200 nursery/primary schools and the number increased to 8300 by 1992. Today this programme is run in many places in Nigeria.

Provisions of the NPE towards Effective Implementation of ECCE in Nigeria

The FRN (2014) in the NPE stipulates in section 3, sub section 14(a)-(f) measures to be taken to ensure the effective provision of early childhood care and education in Nigeria. It states that, government on its part shall:

- (a) Establish Pre-Primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community/private provision of pre-primary education;
- (b) Make provisions in teacher education programmes for specialisation in early childhood education;
- (c) Ensure that the medium of instruction is primarily 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;
- (d) 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 ratio shall be 1:25.

- (e) Set and monitor minimum standards for early child care centres in the country and
- (f) Ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood facilities.

The Practical Realities of Early Childhood Care and Education in Nigeria

Observation of existing schools offering early childhood care and education in Nigeria and evidences from a UNESCO study in 2007 concerning organisations and practices in early childhood care and development education in Nigeria show some incongruence between set standards and the practical realities on ground. Assessing on-going practices in the light of the measures listed in the NPE shows the following lapses and consequences:

- **Proliferation of Early Childhood Care and Education Centres:** The provision of the NPE that encourages private efforts in the establishment of these centres in the country, coupled with the huge demand for early childhood care and education by parents in the country has led to proliferation to an extent that, almost every household now operates an early childhood centre. Children are housed in various places, buildings and premises including residential houses. The consequences of flouting of standards and regulations include giving substandard and irregular education to children capable of marring their future. Ejieh, (2006) blames this situation on inadequate supervision of early childhood care and educational institutions in Nigeria.
- **Inadequate Supervision of Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes:** Officials of the Ministries of Education who are supposed to visit these institutions from time to time to inspect personnel, school plant and instruction hardly do this. Many of these schools are in operation without approval and many of such schools lack in standards. They therefore offer low quality services thus defeating the essence of their existence.
- **Low Quality of Early Childhood Care and Education Teachers:** Teacher quality is a major determinant of educational outcome but in early childhood care and education in Nigeria today this factor has been relegated. Only few of the institutions running this programme have qualified teachers. The minimum recommended qualification of NCE by schools offering early childhood care and education in Nigeria is hardly observed. Many schools keep secondary school and Grade II teachers in their staff rolls. Those with teachers having the right qualifications often under pay these teachers, with the consequences of low commitment and ineffective teaching.
- **Non Implementation of Teacher-Pupil Ratio:** The stipulated Teacher-Pupil ratio of 1:25 is not implemented. Ejieh (2006) suggests that, this is obviously because supervision to check these inadequacies is not carried out. The overriding profit motives

of private owners of these schools who prefer to put more pupils than necessary in one class to conserve space for more other children and to reduce the number of teachers to employ has worked against this ratio .

- **Language Policy Failure:** Language policy is hardly observed in pre-primary schools. Many pre-primary schools including those in rural areas carry out their teaching and learning in English language. The mother tongue or language of the immediate environment is often neglected.

- **Governments' General Negligence:** government is slow about taking appropriate measures for effective delivery of early childhood care and education programmes in Nigeria. Though permissions are granted to some individuals and other organisations by the government to open the schools, its presence in the sector has remained minimal. The mandate on public primary schools to make arrangements for early childhood care and education is not complied with. In majority of the schools these centres do not exist. This has limited absorptive capacities to accommodate children that would otherwise benefit from such programmes.

- **Higher Education and Early Childhood Care and Education in Nigeria:** Early Childhood Care and Education is offered by only few higher institutions in Nigeria. Even in these institutions the enrolment is poor into this course. It is noted that, many early childhood care and education centres in Nigeria are privately owned, so they pay their teachers low wages because of their profit motives. Job security is lacking and they rarely encourage their teachers to go for in-service. The poor financial emoluments of early childhood care and education teachers especially in the private schools inhibit teachers' affordability of further study expenses. Government on its part has not shown much commitment in the area of providing training at higher levels for the productivity of specialists. It has also done little in the expansion of this provision as stipulated in the policy. The limited spaces for graduates of early childhood care and education to occupy has become a disincentive to many that would have taken to higher education in the area of early childhood care and education in Nigeria. The implication is that, the programme is deprived of quality teaching force that would meaningfully impact the lives of children.

Prospects of Early Childhood Care and Education in Nigeria

The appalling situation of early childhood care and education in Nigeria does not in any way suggest a loss of hope for this programme in Nigeria. The UBE Act for instance has made additional provisions for every public primary school to have a pre-primary school creation to take care of pre-primary school age children, to get them ready for primary school. If the UBE law is put into effect, the level of public participation in early childhood care and education would increase.

Also, early childhood care and education degrees are now common to find in Nigerian higher institutions. Collaborative efforts, policies and advocacy are on to promote child

development. In this regard there are UNICEF interventions in home country's curriculum revision by the government for effective early childhood care and education.

Conclusion

Early childhood care and education is an important stage in child education. Failure at this stage affects successes at other levels. The practical reality is that, early childhood care and education in Nigeria has not received the desired attention. It therefore deserves transformation. This requires the cooperative efforts of all stakeholders to ensure proper management of early childhood care and education in Nigeria to make it succeed.

Recommendation

Based on the current situation of early childhood care and education in Nigeria, and the need to transform early childhood care and education in Nigeria, this paper recommends as follows:

1. Requirements and regulations guiding early childhood care and education should be enforced with penalties to deter the establishment of substandard early childhood care and education centres in Nigeria.
2. Monitoring of early childhood care and education establishments should be effectively carried out by designated officers to ensure that minimum standards are observed.
3. Salaries and fees of all early childhood care and education centres should be regulated by government to bring stability into the programme.
4. Government should ensure the increase in programme offerings at higher education level and grant scholarships to encourage teachers to go into early childhood care and education courses in Nigeria.

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