EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGES OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND INSECURITY TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is fundamental to a child's development, with considerable long-term effects on an individual's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being. However, despite the crucial role ECE plays in laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development, Nigeria continues to struggle with significant obstacles that affect access, quality, and equity in early childhood education. The study critically examines early childhood education, focusing on the challenges of economic hardship and insecurity towards sustainable development in Nigeria. Recommendations for addressing these challenges and ensuring the effective delivery of ECE in Nigeria are provided.

Keywords: Early childhood education, economic hardship, insecurity, sustainable development.

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is globally recognized as a critical period for children's development. The education has significant long-term effects on an individual's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being (UNICEF, 2022). In Nigeria, ECE is essential to achieving sustainable development goals, as outlined by the United Nations (SDGs 4 and 10) (UNESCO, 2021), which emphasize the importance of quality education. Despite the acknowledged importance of early childhood education, it is however unfortunate that Nigeria faces major challenges, including economic hardship and insecurity.

Economic hardship, driven by fluctuating oil prices, inflation, unemployment, and underinvestment in education, severely affects the education sector (World Bank, 2023). In essence, these factors hinder the effective delivery of early childhood education, thereby threatening the nation's sustainable development goals. On another hand, widespread insecurity, ranging from insurgencies in the Northeast to rural banditry and urban violence exacerbates the already strained system, creating environments where children are deprived of safe, consistent, and quality education (Amadi, 2021). It is imperative to note that the problem of economic hardship and insecurity in Nigeria are not new, but their persistent and worsening state in recent years have significantly affected the delivery of early childhood education. Many families struggle hard to afford basic necessities, thus education often becomes an afterthought.

The increasing incidence of violence, in various parts of Nigeria has led to school closures, forced displacement, and the loss of educational infrastructure, rendering large number of the population without access to early learning (Olaniyan, 2021).This paper examines early childhood education, focusing on the challenges of economic hardship and insecurity towards sustainable

development in Nigeria. It also highlights policy implications and offers recommendations for overcoming these barriers to ensure that Nigeria can build a more sustainable and equitable future through the provision of quality early childhood education.

The Concept of Early Childhood Education and its Importance

Early childhood education (ECE) refers to the education provided to children in their early years, typically from birth to age eight. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) in its National Policy on Education defined ECE as the type of education designed for children between the ages of 0 and 5 years in an early childhood care centre or nursery before the start of primary school. It is also viewed as a period in which children receive their most important school learning experiences (Yoleri, 2014). Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2017) defined early childhood education (ECE) as the basic preparatory type of education offered to children before substantive education.It encompasses early learning opportunities provided through formal institutions such as preschools and informal environments like home learning (Britto, Yoshikawa, &Boller, 2021). Based on these views, ECE can be understood as the initial stage of education provided to children between the ages of 0 and 4, aimed at preparing them for future schooling. The objectives of ECE according to FRN (2014:6) include:

1. To promote a smooth transition of a child from the home to the school; to prepare the child for the primary level education.
2. to provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, among others) and
3. To inculcate social norms in children.

Others are;

4. To inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys and to develop in children a sense of co-operation and team spirit.
5. to inculcate good habits, especially good health habits and
6. To teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, among others, through play.

From these objectives, it can be interpreted that ECE serves as the foundation upon which all other levels of education are built and, most importantly, is the form of education that influences preschoolers' lifelong learning and overall development.

The importance of ECE education cannot be overstated. Among its many benefits include the provision of proper care, learning experiences, supervision, and security for children while their parents are at work (FRN, 2014). Acar (2014) highlighted that ECE supports children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. The learning experiences children receive in ECE have a significant influence on their future achievements, as they lay the groundwork for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2014). Essentially, ECE serves as the cornerstone of an individual's education, making it crucial for children's success in later educational stages.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2017) also emphasized that ECE is a key stage in children's development, fostering future growth and learning while promoting parental workforce participation, particularly among mothers. It is vital for children’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and social skills (Woodhead, 2020). The early childhood years are also recognized as a period of rapid brain development, where neural connections are formed that

influence a child's ability to learn, communicate, and manage emotions (Shonkoff& Phillips, 2021). Perhaps, this is why the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021), stated that ECE is crucial for ensuring that children acquire the necessary cognitive, emotional, and social skills that will enable them to succeed in school and later life. This implies that children who attend quality early childhood education programs are more likely to succeed academically and socially in later life.

Recent studies also indicate that ECE can significantly reduce the likelihood of poverty and inequality later in life (Britto, Yoshikawa, &Boller, 2021).This is because it is during early childhood years that the seeds of future learning are sown, making ECE a crucial determinant of not only individual success but also broader societal outcomes such as poverty reduction, equity, and sustainable development. ECE also contributes to improved health outcomes and reduces the likelihood of involvement in criminal activities, making it a powerful tool for social mobility and national development (UNICEF, 2022). From these assertions, it can be construed that ECE offers extensive benefits not only for children but also for their parents and society at large.

Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

The state of early childhood education in Nigeria is mixed, with various regions experiencing differing levels of access and quality. While some urban centers have well-equipped early childhood centers, many rural areas still lack access to basic educational services (Adebayo & Balogun, 2022). In addition, issues such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, and insufficient government funding are common challenges facing ECE in Nigeria (Aina, 2021). The Nigerian government has made commitments under international frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to provide inclusive and equitable quality education to all children (United Nations, 2015). Yet, the implementation of these commitments is often hampered by limited resources, policy inconsistencies, and socio-economic factors such as poverty and insecurity. The increasing economic hardships and security concerns further exacerbate these challenges.

Sustainable development in Nigeria, particularly in the context of human capital development, cannot be achieved without addressing the foundational role that ECE plays in building knowledgeable, healthy, and resilient individuals who can contribute to the nation's growth.

Economic Hardship and Its Impact on Early Childhood Education

Nigeria's economy, the largest in Africa, is heavily reliant on oil exports, which account for about 90% of its foreign exchange earnings. However, this reliance has made the economy vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices, leading to recurring economic crises (Onyeiwu, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated Nigeria’s economic instability, pushing more families into poverty (Oladele, 2023). According to the World Bank, over 40% of the Nigerian population lives below the poverty line, a situation worsened by high inflation rates and rising unemployment (World Bank, 2023).The current state of economic hardship has a direct and profound impact on early childhood education in the country.

Economic hardship significantly limits access to early childhood education in Nigeria. Many families, particularly those in rural areas, are unable to afford the costs associated with education, including school fees, uniforms, learning materials, and transportation (Okeke, 2022). For families living in extreme poverty, early childhood education is often seen as a luxury rather than a necessity, and children are either kept at home to assist with domestic work or are sent to

work to contribute to the family's income. This deprives children of the opportunity to engage in early learning, which is critical for their long-term development (Aina, 2021).

The Nigerian government has made efforts to introduce free early childhood education through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, but the implementation of this policy is uneven, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Adebayo &Balogun, 2022). Additionally, the quality of free education is often poor, with overcrowded classrooms, unqualified teachers, and a lack of basic infrastructure (Ogunleye, 2021). As a result, even when children have access to early childhood education, the quality of education they receive is far from optimal.

Research has shown that poverty negatively impacts not only access to education but also learning outcomes. Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience developmental delays, lower cognitive abilities, and emotional distress, which can hinder their ability to succeed in school (Britto et al., 2021). These children often suffer from poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, and stressful home environments, all of which contribute to lower academic performance and reduced school attendance (Oladele, 2023). In Nigeria, the high rates of child poverty create significant barriers to achieving the goals of universal early childhood education.

Insecurity and Its Impact on Early Childhood Education

Nigeria has faced a significant rise in insecurity over the past two decades, with various forms of violence affecting different regions of the country. The BokoHaram insurgency in the North-East, the rise of banditry in the North-West, and the persistent conflict between herders and farmers in the Middle Belt have created a national crisis (Olaniyan, 2021). Kidnappings, abductions, and terrorist attacks have become common occurrences, with schools frequently being targeted. As a result, insecurity has become one of the most pressing challenges facing the education sector in Nigeria.

Insecurity has led to the closure of hundreds of schools, particularly in the northern regions of Nigeria, where the BokoHaram insurgency is most prevalent. Attacks by insurgents have led to the destruction of infrastructure and the closure of schools (Amadi, 2021). In Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, thousands of children have been denied access to education due to the destruction of schools and the displacement of families (Dada, 2022). A 2022 UNICEF report noted that more than 10 million children were out of school in Nigeria, with many of these children located in conflict-affected areas (UNICEF, 2022). The frequent abduction of schoolchildren, as seen in the Chibok and Dapchi incidents, has created an atmosphere of fear, discouraging parents from sending their children to school (Agbo, 2023). In addition, insecurity has led to the displacement of thousands of families, making it difficult for displaced children to access education.

Furthermore, the psychological impact of living in conflict-affected areas is profound, particularly for young children. Children exposed to violence and instability are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, which can hinder their ability to learn and engage in social interactions (Dada, 2022). This is because early childhood is a sensitive period for emotional and psychological development, and prolonged exposure to insecurity can have long-lasting effects on a child's mental health and future learning outcomes (Agbo, 2023).School closures have largely had a devastating effect on early childhood education, as children are deprived of the safety, structure, and learning opportunities that schools provide.

The Role of Early Childhood Education in Sustainable Development

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, emphasize the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Early Childhood Education is a key component of achieving this goal, as it helps to reduce inequalities and promotes lifelong learning opportunities (United Nations, 2015). Quality ECE contributes to sustainable development by providing children with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in school and in life. It also fosters social cohesion, reduces the likelihood of conflict, and promotes economic growth by creating a more educated workforce (Woodhead, 2020).

Early Childhood Education also has the potential to reduce inequality by providing all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, with a strong start in life. When children are denied access to education due to poverty or insecurity, their opportunities for cognitive, social, and emotional development are significantly reduced (Ajayi, 2021). This not only impacts their individual potential but also the country's ability to achieve long-term economic growth, social cohesion, and political stability (Ogunleye, 2021). Research shows that children who attend quality early childhood education programs are more likely to succeed in school, earn higher incomes, and contribute to their communities as adults (Britto et al., 2021). In Nigeria, however, access to ECE is highly unequal, with children from wealthier families far more likely to attend early childhood education programs than those from poor families (UNICEF, 2022). Addressing these inequalities is crucial to achieving sustainable development in Nigeria.

In conflict-affected areas, early childhood education can play a critical role in peace-building. ECE programs that promote social and emotional learning can help children develop the skills they need to manage their emotions, resolve conflicts peacefully, and build positive relationships with others (Yoshikawa et al., 2020). In fostering these skills at an early age, ECE can contribute to the creation of more peaceful and inclusive societies.

Governments Efforts/Interventions

The Nigerian government has implemented various policies aimed at improving early childhood education. The National Policy on Education (2022) outlines the government's commitment to providing free and compulsory education for all children, including those in early childhood (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). The policy emphasizes the importance of early learning and development, and the need for qualified teachers, adequate infrastructure, and learning materials. However, the implementation of these policies has been uneven, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas (Adebayo &Balogun, 2022).

In response to the insecurity in the North-East, the Nigerian government, in collaboration with international organizations such as UNICEF, has implemented various interventions aimed at providing education to children in conflict-affected areas. These interventions include the construction of temporary learning spaces, the provision of psycho-social support for children affected by conflict, and the recruitment of volunteer teachers (UNICEF, 2022). While these interventions have had some success, they are often limited in scope and funding, and many children remain out of school.

The Way Forward: Strategies for Improving Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

To address the challenges of economic hardship and insecurity in early childhood education, several policy recommendations are necessary. These include:

Increased Investment in ECE: The Nigerian government needs to increase its investment in early childhood education, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. This includes providing

adequate funding for the construction of schools, the recruitment and training of teachers, and the provision of learning materials (Adebayo &Balogun, 2022), and creating safe learning environments in conflict-affected areas (Ezenwa, 2023).

Strengthening Social Safety Nets: Social safety nets, such as cash transfer programs, can help alleviate the economic burden on families and enable them to send their children to school. These programs should be expanded to reach more families in need (World Bank, 2023).

Improving Security in Conflict Zones: The Nigerian government needs to take more aggressive action to address the insecurity in conflict-affected areas. This includes improving the security of schools and ensuring that children can attend school without fear of violence (Olaniyan, 2021).

Seeking Support from International Organizations and NGOs: International organizations, such as UNICEF, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in supporting early childhood education in Nigeria. These organizations provide funding, technical assistance, and advocacy to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education, even in the most difficult circumstances (Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Their continued support will be essential in addressing the challenges of economic hardship and insecurity in Nigeria.

Community Engagement: Community involvement is key to the success of early childhood education programs. Parents, local leaders, and community organizations can play an important role in advocating for quality education, supporting teachers, and ensuring that children attend school regularly (Aina, 2021). Engaging communities in the design and implementation of early childhood education programs can help to ensure that these programs are culturally relevant and meet the needs of the children they serve.

Conclusion

Early childhood education is a critical component of sustainable development in Nigeria, yet it is severely constrained by economic hardship and insecurity. The inability of many families to afford early childhood education, combined with the insecurity that plagues much of the country, particularly in the North-East, has severely limited access to quality education for many young children. In addressing these challenges, it requires a multi-faceted approach that includes increased investment in education, improved security measures, and the involvement of international organizations and local communities.

Nigeria's future depends on its ability to provide quality early childhood education to all of its children. Without this, the country risks perpetuating cycles of poverty, inequality, and conflict. However, with the right policies and interventions, Nigeria can build a more inclusive and sustainable educational system that ensures that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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