

Assessing the Imperatives of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: Principles, Practices and Benefits

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Abstract

The education of children is one of their fundamental human rights. A child possesses this right from birth. Therefore, education is the bedrock of every development of the human mind and the human society. The topic of this paper, “Assessing the Imperatives of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: Principles, Practices and Benefits” is apt. This paper examines the standpoint of pre-primary education in Nigeria as enshrined in the National Policy on Education. The Principles and practices by both the private educational service providers and the government. The imperatives of early childhood education stems from the fact that the child should inculcate basic skills early in life for all-round development. It also takes into cognizance the basic elements of an early childhood education programme. Again, the roles of early childhood teachers were examined. Finally, the benefits of early childhood education are highlighted in this paper which include: enthusiasm for lifelong learning, improved social skills, better performance in higher classes, and improved attention spans.

Key Words: Assessment, Benefits, Early Childhood, Education, Elements, Imperatives, Pre-Primary Education.

Introduction

Early childhood education is a broad term used to describe any type of educational programme that serves children in their preschool years, before they are old enough to enter kindergarten. Early childhood education may consist of any number of activities and experiences designed to aid in the cognitive and social development of preschool children before they enter elementary school. The way and manner early childhood education is provided can vary from one state to the next or even from one school to the other within the same state. Preschool education programmes may be designed specifically for either three, four or five years olds. These programmes may be provided in childcare and daycare or nursery school settings, as well as more conventional pre-kindergarten classrooms. Again, they may be housed in centre-based, home based, or public-school settings, and they may be offered part-day, fully-day on even or a year-round schedule to include summers (Kamerman, 2006).

Early childhood education programmes also differ in terms of funding and sponsorship, and can be privately run, operated by a local school system, or operated through a state or federally funded programmes. In Nigeria, for instance, early childhood education is majorly provided by private educational service providers (private nursery and primary schools). Parents give patronage to private educational service providers. This is due to the fact that privately owned schools have proven to be committed and diligent in the task of educating pre-school children. Similarly, the state government also offer these services even though they are faced with low patronage because of lack of dedication on the part of some of the teachers in public primary schools. Financially, early childhood education programmes may be run by private for-product companies, by churches, or as part of a private school curriculum. It is common for these types of early childhood education programmes to be tuition based (McDowel Clark, 2013).

The Imperatives of Early Childhood Education

Early child's exposure to learning is the responsibility of parents and government at various levels. They are the people that provide the needed facilities for the child to learn. This obligation cannot be ignored when educational stakeholders are reminded that failure to provide education for the child is tantamount to failure in providing the child with a future education of the child become very imperative and in fact a constitutional right to him. The child's learning process begins at the fetal developmental stage, when he begins to learn by being sensitized in the process, to when he is given birth to. The very basic foundation of the child begins with the informal education that starts at babyhood or infancy, and through adolescence.

The prime provider of this learning is the parent to the child. The conventional curriculum of the child is based on the already acquired knowledge by parents over time. It begins with the act of communication. This responsibility is not only centred on the family settings but, outside the home. This education commences before the normal schooling age. The child begins to learn through signs and symbols as he/she navigates through the babbling stage until he begins to learn the act of communication such as BA, PA, MA, DA and TA. At the age of two, the parents begin to teach him about his physiognomy using such interactive questions such as: show me your head, show me your mouth and others. The child begins to learn alphabets and numerical figures. The child is already in the crèche and nursery stage, when outside family setting learning process begins to take place in the child. Learning process becomes dual settings, the home and the school (Doherty and Hughes, 2009).

This co-operative learning structure becomes built on the home and school. The home is now bestowed with the responsibility of teaching the child some basic fundamental concepts, which are emended on toilet training in action of family and societal values to the child. He is exposed to the basis of his cultural ideas and valued art of dressing, how to conduct oneself at home and in public, a respect for elders, siblings and extended relation. The parents are also bestowed with bearing the child's family care, such as putting everything in place to guarantee the child's physiological, and esthetic needs; paying the institutional cost and playing the noble role of supervision and monitoring of the child.

The formal, that is, the outside home setting, “the school” plays the role of being adequately and appropriately engrossed in providing the child the basis of learning through the act of the three Rs: Reading, (W)riting and (A)rithmetic. It goes beyond by ensuring that the child acquires according to the Nigerian’s philosophy of education, the virtues which include inculcation of national consciousness and unity (through National Anthem recitation), inculcation of right values as attitudes needed for the child’s survival in the society, acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and consistence, mentally and physically for him to live and contribute to the development of his society. It shares the responsibility of providing the child the appropriate guidance and counseling, supervision and monitoring (Tassoni, 2000).

Marope and Kaga (2005) has this to say about early child education. In their opinion, early childhood education is crucial to the child’s development and should be entered into continuously with someone you trust.

Early Childhood/Pre-Primary Education in Nigeria

According to the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013):

1. Early childhood/Pre-primary education as referred to in the document is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten.
2. The responsibilities of government for pre-primary education shall be to promote the training of qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable curriculum, supervise and control the quality of such institutions, and establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools.
3. The purpose of pre-primary education 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 (one the farms, in the markets, officers, etc.);
 - (d) Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.;
 - (e) Develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit;
 - (f) Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
 - (g) Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc., through play.
4. Government Shall:
 - (a) Establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.
 - (b) Make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education;
 - (c) 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;
- (iii) 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;
- (iv) set and monitor minimum standard for early childcare centres in the country, and
- (v) ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers associations in the running and maintenance of Early childhood education facilities.

The above provisions are made to enhance effective planning and implementation of pre-school educational programmes for Nigeria children.

The Elements of an Early Childhood Education Programme

According to Plowman and Stephen (2003) much has been debated over the years about what type of programme qualifies as education. Another concern of today's early childhood education programme is ensuring that they are of high quality. The Early Childhood for All Campaign, a coalition of leaders who work to ensure that children have access to high-quality early education, recognizes early childhood education as "...warm, nurturing care and enriched learning experiences designed to stimulate a child's development in all key developmental areas".

Essentially, a high-quality early childhood programme includes five critical components such as:

- a. Provides small class sizes and low teacher – child ratios.
- b. Employs well educated, adequately paid teachers.
- c. Assesses children to enhance student learning and identify concerns.
- d. Addresses child health, nutrition, and family needs as part of a comprehensive service network.
- e. Provides a well-rounded curriculum that supports all areas of development.

Significantly, the effectiveness of an early childhood programme is largely dependent on a number of factors: a quality staff, an appropriate environment, consistent scheduling, proper grouping practices (Euryice, 2009).

Hooper (2018) declares that there are equally recognized characteristics of a high quality early childhood education programme in addition to the ones listed earlier:

1. a balanced schedule that does not result in rushed or fatigued children.
2. access to safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment, along with the supervision and guidance of competent, caring adults.
3. teachers who frequently check children's progress
4. a balance between individual, small group, and large group activities.
5. a clear statement of goals and a comprehensive philosophy that addresses all areas of child development.
6. engages children in purposeful learning activities and play, which is instructed by teachers who work from lesson and activity plans.

In summary, early childhood curriculum and activities should be:

1. **Balanced:** The curriculum should provide a balance of play and structured activities, including teacher and child-initiated exploration.
2. **Based on the child's developmental needs:** Activities, materials and schedules should be appropriate to a child's age and support all developmental domains.
3. **Well-planned:** The curriculum should reflect current research, on child development and should include specific learning goals for children (Neaum, 2013).

The Role of Early Childhood Teachers in a High-Quality Programme

McGevitt and Omrod (2016) opine that pre-school teachers teach and nurture our youngest children. These early childhood educators help these young learners become successful learners, readers, and writers. In this way, early childhood teachers play significant role in the lives of early childhood learners, some of whom may lack adequate experiences at home. These professionals help children: recognise numbers, increase their knowledge, learn to count, develop language abilities, become familiar with books and other printed materials. Moreso, Footnote Anning, Cullen, and Fler (2004) emphasize that early childhood teachers may use a number of strategies for teaching the above skills while they nurture their students' natural curiosity and their zest for learning. They can accomplish their teaching goals by building children's background knowledge and thinking skills, creating a learning environment for young children, checking children's progress, helping children develop listening and speaking skills and many others.

Benefits of Early Childhood Education

Every experience or encounter for young children presents a learning opportunity. They learn from everything they see, do, hear, feel, smell and taste, everyone they interact (talk, play, laugh) with and everywhere they go. Studies suggest that quality childhood education offers a range of benefits to children, as well as their families and their communities (Jeffrey, 2014). In a recent report (Jepkemboi, Glandeur, Steve, Roldby & Lutz. (2016), childhood education specialists argued that pre-school children learn best when they interact with their peers, receive kind treatment from their parents and educators, and do not feel pressured to learn. The specialists also suggested that children learn the most when educational and instructional activities make up a small segment of their days, which is something that pre-school quality programme emphasises.

Some of the advantages of early childhood education include:

7. **Enthusiasm for lifelong learning:** Children who receive quality early education are reportedly more confident and curious, which causes them to perform better in secondary and high school. Children learn how to manage challenges and build resilience in times of difficulty; settle easily at school to reap the benefits of education faster, and acquire a long-term interest in learning different things, including playing music, dancing, singing, construction, cooking etc.
8. **Improved social skill:** Children learn to engage better with other children and adults. The pre-school environment allows children to listen to others and express their own ideas, make friends, share, co-operate, and become accountable for their actions.

9. **Better performance in higher classes:** Children who receive early education are known to have a reduced need for special education instruction in higher elementary school and beyond. Quality pre-school programmes help to build a strong foundation for the child's physical, mental, emotional and social development that prepares them for a lifetime.
10. **Improved attention spans:** Children are inclined to be curious and interested in discovering new things. Quality early education programmes for children maximize opportunities for the discovery of new experiences, new environments, and new friends, while maintaining a balance with the ability to listen, participate in group tasks, follow directions, and work independently, all of which develop the vital life skill of concentration.

Also, studies have indicated that early education pre-school programmes increase the likelihood of children graduating from high school with fewer behavioural issues, attending colleges, and becoming responsible young adults (Kato, Kamil & Ozaki, 2002).

Challenges Encountered

In spite of all the implicit and explicit merits derivable from Early Childhood Care and Education practices, there seem not to be adequate teaching-learning facilities for the early child learners. Most privately owned pre-primary and primary schools are operated in unapproved often dilapidated or uncompleted buildings, devoid of approved recreational facilities. Similarly, the early childhood learner in most cases is challenged with the lack of motivation to learn. Furthermore, Early Childhood education is faced with environmental challenges that jeopardize effective teaching and learning. Again, effective delivery of quality instruction to the early childhood learner is further handicapped by the poor quality of teachers engaged by proprietors.

Conclusion

Early education benefits all young children and socialises them for starting school. There is more unanimous agreement in the child development literature that children's earliest experiences and learning form the basis for subsequent learning. This programme accounts for the capacity of the child to soak up new learning when the child is three years old.

While attending an early childhood education programme, children are likely to improve their language and motor skills, while developing the learning and cognitive skills necessary to move on to primary school.

Recommendations

1. Parents and guardians should collaborate with Early childhood educators in providing enabling environment for teaching and learning of the early child pupil.
2. The government should ensure holistic regulation and control of establishment and operation of all categories of early childhood care and education facilities.
3. There should be government funding of ECCDE programmes in states to reduce exploitative tendencies of the private proprietors.

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