

Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood education (ECE) is an essential aspect of formal education provided to children from birth to age 8 to promote their cognitive, social, and emotional development, language and speech development, and the development of fine and gross motor skills. ECE reduces the rate of school dropout, promotes higher levels of school achievement, and helps to curb the juvenile arrest rate. However, ECE faces many bottlenecks that can hinder its effectiveness. This is true throughout the world and in Nigeria in particular.

The challenges to Nigerian ECE include poor infrastructure facilities, low teachers' salaries, inadequate implementation of the early childhood curriculum, employment of unqualified and incompetent teachers with little or no in-depth knowledge of early childhood and appropriate developmental Practices, corruption, and poor funding. The Proliferation of ECE according to Nigeria's National Policy on Education is a pertinent issue that has led to poor standards and a lack of proper regulation of ECE institutions across the country. Further, the language of the immediate environment as a medium of instruction is not strictly adhered to in most states in Nigeria among others. This study provides an overview of Nigeria's educational System which birthed ECE in the country.

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is the bedrock of any child's development and the key foundation of the Nigerian educational system. The early childhood stage is one during which children experience a wide number of changes and forms of development including cognitive development, social and emotional development, speech and language development, and fine motor and gross motor development among others.

ECE is also known as "pre-primary Education", as it refers to the education given to young learners before they are old enough to enter primary school. Nigerian's National Policy on Education 2013 describes ECE as the care, protection, stimulation, and learning promoted in children from ages 0-4 years in a creche or nursery. It can also be defined as education provided in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 years prior to their entering the primary school (FRN, 2004).

In Nigeria, ECE is provided by both private and public players, and aims to:

1. Provide a smooth transition for children from home to school
2. Prepare children for primary education or mainstream education
3. Cultivate social norms
4. Cultivate a spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and the environment, art, music, and playing with toys
5. Develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit among children
6. Help children form good habits, especially related to health
7. Teaching the basics of numbers, letters, colors, shapes, forms, and more

ECE is of paramount concern because it enables children to improve their self-confidence, enhances

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independence, widens their scope of understanding, and helps them gain mastery of the world around them.

Despite the above, Olaleye et al. (2009) assert that some recent difficulties have brought ECE to the forefront of public awareness. These include the fundamental changes in the Nigerian economy and its impact on family life, the rising cost of living, the emergence of a single-parent household, the increased number of teenage parents, the declining impact of the extended family, and the call by many professionals for recognition of the rights of children.

Origins of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria and an Overview of the Nigerian Educational System.

In Nigeria, ECE started as a children's Sunday school program during the colonial era, teaching them literacy skills and bible stories. This was done to preserve and provide basic education to the children of colonial officials and children who had been converted by missionaries. Classes were only held on Sundays because that was the only day parents could send them. As churches were established schools were also established mainly to take care of officials' children and those of a few Nigerian elites. After independence in 1960, the demand for ECE increased and the churches began to charge tuition fees, which made their classes accessible to only a few wealthy Nigerians.

During the post-colonial era, Nigerians acquired wealth which changed their tastes and cultural value systems, hence, sending children to ECE classes became a status symbol. Further, married women often needed to work to assist their husbands with the provision of household essentials, because the country's economic situation was no longer favorable.

Following independence in 1960, the 1969 National Curriculum Conference and the 1973 National Education Seminar were organized to review and identify new policies and goals for the Nigerian education system. This led to the country's first attempt at universal education with the launch of universal primary education (UPE) in 1976 and the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977. With the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1977 which ushered in free and compulsory education, the extended family system gradually gave way, and many household staff members went back to school including illiterate mothers who wanted to complete their education and seek better employment opportunities. However, the country's rapidly increasing population, poor program management, inadequate funding, a shortage of trained teachers, and political instability challenged UPE's implementation and continuity and led to its eventual abandonment (Okoroma, 2006). In 1999, under the leadership of Nigeria's first democratic government, the UPE was resuscitated and renamed UBE. The National policy NPE spells out the philosophy of the Nigerian educational system and guides educational provision with a focus on ensuring equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels of education through compulsory free and primary instruction for all NPE, 2013, p.iii. The UBE ensured a primary education for every Nigerian child; this was extended in 2004 to include junior secondary education and in 2013 to include pre-primary education.

The same problems that affected the UPE more than 40 years ago, such as inadequate government funding and uncoordinated monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of both the educational system. (Bolaji et al; 2015; FME, 2010) and teacher education programs (EDOREN, 2014; World Bank, 2014) continue to affect the Nigerian education system today. Many schools have insufficient instructional resources, dilapidated facilities, inadequate water and sanitation systems, overcrowded classrooms, untrained teachers, and a high rate of teacher absenteeism (Adekola, 2007; Moja, 2009; Santocross et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2015). This has led to a widespread loss of confidence in the public school system and the growth of private schools, which now comprise a substantial component of Nigeria's educational sector. (Hamma, 2013; Labi et al., 2004; Tooley & Dixon, 2006).

Prior to 2004, provisions for children under the age of 6 were absent from the NPE. Public pre-school came into existence following the 2004 Universal Basic Education Act which established pre-primary sections within existing primary schools. (Salami, 2016). An official ECE policy was issued in response to and as evidence of the commitments made in the country's development plan, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, and international development projects, such as Education for All and the United

Nations' Millennium Development Goals (NPE, 20013). In a bid to ensure quality education for children under the age of 5, the government established the National Minimum Standard for Early Childhood Care Centers (NMSECC, 2007) to prescribe minimum standards; and the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development (NPIECD, 2007) to effectively integrate and coordinate interventions from the various ECE stakeholders such as health departments, protection and safety organization, and to establish Model Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECID) centers in existing public schools. (Salami, 2016).

The national policy segments ECE into two age groups, early childhood care, development, and education (ECCDE), for children 0–4 years, and pre-primary education, for those aged 5 until they enter primary school. ECCDE is provided in creches, daycares, and play group centers, while pre-primary care is provided in pre-schools.

Few centers in Nigeria operate solely as daycare centers, playgroups, or pre-schools; most are situated within primary schools, and many operate out of residential, business, and religious buildings, or on university campuses (Ejeh, 2006). With the possible exception of their high cost, private ECE programs are characterized by poor infrastructure and inadequate educational resources, and in both public and private ECE centers, the quality of teaching is generally low. This is because there is no proper monitoring, and the Nigerian government is insensitive to ECE.

Conclusion

The early childhood stage is the most important aspect of a child's life and must be handled with great care. ECE plays a vital role in the development of these young minds because most of what children learn prepares them for the next stages of life. It is the foundation upon which their mental development is built. The human brain undergoes rapid growth during the early childhood years, and this is the time in which a child builds cognitive and character skills. Cognitive skills are the core skills your brain uses to think, solve problems, read, learn, remember things, and (most importantly) pay attention. Character skills are soft skills such as openness to learning, conscientiousness, tolerance, working with others, resilience, and self-control.



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