

Challenges of Early Childhood Education in Sokoto State of Nigeria: Implication for Counselling

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Abstract

Contemporary Early Child Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) in Nigeria are becoming more diverse. Nevertheless, it is still bedeviled with issues and problems. This paper discusses the existing UBE programme, policies and strategies in the implementation of the ECCDE in Nigeria. The paper further examines the challenges of ECCDE in Nigeria. The main issues of which include the use of English as medium of communication and instruction; lack of competent and qualified teachers; lack of effective supervision; and the ratio of teacher to pupils. The paper concludes that for Nigeria to achieve sustainable education development, interventions to improve the quality of ECCDE in Nigeria, the school-based curriculum must be adequately promoted. The paper suggests the use of mother tongue in teaching at this level, provision of more infrastructures and the introduction of unified standardized curriculum for set of programme.

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Background to the Study

Before now, formalizing the Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) was considered needless in Nigeria, because the society was safe, conducive for child's learning, growth and development. The adult members of the society were readily available and willing to help and guide the child in his developmental processes, even with or without the presence of the parents. Today, the environment is hostile and not safe, mothers are economically engaged and children cannot safely be in the care of neighbours. (Maigida, 2000) In support of this view Bagudo (2008), opined that an estimated figure of one hundred million children, struggle daily for survival in villages and cities, and are exposed to the risk of hunger, poverty, disease, illiteracy and abuses because of the increasing incidences of child's sexual molestation; food poisoning and ritual killings.

It is common practice in most societies to make provision for early childhood education programmes of various sorts for children below the official school-going age (usually 6 years) mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools (Obidike, 2012). According to Mahuta (2007) the need to address the problems and salvage these children and the next generation of children from these menace, has necessitated the programme of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE). Oduolowu and Olowe (2011) noted that the early years of children are years of extreme vulnerability and tremendous potentials, during which adequate protection, care and stimulation are essential to provide the foundation for well-being and development. The Federal Government of Nigeria recognizes the importance of early childhood education in Nigeria and as a result it was given prominence in the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2013) as one of the programmes in the Nigerian educational system. According to the NPE the Government shall encourage both community and private efforts in the establishment of ECCDE section based on set standards. Nowadays, early childhood educational institutions are located in various places and buildings comprises of universities and Colleges, premises of some industries and business organizations, church premises, residential buildings with unprecedented expansion owing to the high demand for early childhood care and education by parents (Ejeh, 2006).

Concept of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE)

ECCDE is a pre-primary care and education given to aid physical, social psychological and mental growth and development of the child. This form of education is the one captured variedly as Day-care, Playgroup, Crèche, Kindergarten and Nursery. (Abdulrahman-Yusuf, 2011) In his own view (Ojameruaye 2010 as in Abdulrahman-Yusuf and Asodike 2013) sees ECCDE basically as that which is the care and education of children from birth to primary school age (5+ or 6 years), focusing on children's survival, growth, development and learning - including health, nutrition, hygiene, as well as cognitive, social, physical and emotional development. In other words, ECCDE is the children's care, development and education from birth to the period of exposure to primary schooling experience in the formal, informal and non-formal settings.

According to Ibhaze, (2016) Early Childhood Care Education is the education offered to children who have not yet reached the statutory age of beginning primary school. He further maintained that it is a semi-formal education arrangement, usually outside home where by young children from about the age of 3 years are exposed through play like activities in a group setting through mental, social and physical learning suited to their developmental stages, until the mandatory age of government approved formal schooling. The care in this context is given from birth and the aspect of education takes off from around the age of two when cognition begins to manifest, i.e. ability to acquire knowledge: the mental faculty or process of acquiring knowledge by the use of reasoning, intuition, or perception. Both the care and education promote child's growth and development. According to FRN (2013) Early Childhood Care Development and Education(ECCDE) is the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children aged 0-4years in a crèche or nursery. According to Akinrotimi and Olowe, (2016) ECCDE is any group programme that is designed to promote children's intellectual development, socio-emotional development, language development, physical development and learning from birth to age 8

Existing UBE Programs, Polices and Strategies in the Implementation of the ECCDE in Nigeria

ECCDE is an important component of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) accommodating all forms of pre-primary education. The terms preschool education and kindergarten emphasize education around the ages of 2 to 5+ or 6years in the case of Nigeria. The National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) clearly highlights the objectives of ECCDE as to:

- a. Effect a smooth transition from home to school
- b. Prepare the child for the primary level of education
- c. Provide adequate care, supervision and security for the children while their parents are at work
- d. Inculcate social, moral norms and values
- e. Inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and the use of toys, etc
- f. Develop a sense of cooperation and team-spirit
- g. Stimulate in the child good habits, especially good health habits; and
- h. Teach the rudiments of numbers; letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play.

Basic Curriculum Provision of National Policy on Pre-Primary Education

The FRN (2013) outlined some steps the government designed to achieve the objectives of preprimary education in Nigeria, which are as follows;

- a. Set and monitor minimum standard for ECCDE centres;
- b. Develop and disseminate curriculum materials such as the Integrated Early Childhood Development(IECD)Policy, National Minimu Standard for the establishment of Early Childhood Care Education Centers, IECD Curriculum, IECD Implementation Guidelines and all other materials that will enhance the implementation of ECCDE;

- c. Encourage both community and private efforts in the establishment of ECCDE section based on set standards;
- d. Make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early care and education, and for retraining of teachers;
- e. Ensure that curriculum of teacher education is oriented towards play-way method;
- f. Ensure that ECCDE Centres adopt the following caregiver infant ratios:
 - (i) Crèche shall be 1:10; (ii) Nursery 1:25;
- g. Developed suitable ECCDE curriculum for nationwide implementation;
- h. Supervise and control quality of ECCDE institutions;
- i. Make provision for the production and effective utilization of learning and instructional materials in adequate numbers; and
- j. Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of immediate community; and to this end will:
 - i. Develop the orthography of more Nigerian languages, and
 - ii. Produce textbooks, supplementary readers and other instructional materials in Nigerian languages.

Relevance of ECCDE to Achievement of Sustainable Educational Development in Sokoto State

Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) have so far proved to be a very useful component for the achievement of sustainable education development in Nigeria as a whole and Sokoto state in particular. Experience has shown that early childhood education provides children with high sense of security, welfare and physical love while their parents are at work. Such parents no doubt, have peace of mind each time they remember that their children are in safe hands. Supporting the above claim, Acho (1992) indicates that ECCDE provides children the opportunity to interact with teachers and peers and for playing with their mates. By this process children are capable of developing good language skills, numeracy skills and social habits for effective communication needed now and in later stages of life. Through observation, imitation and modeling, preschoolers with the advantage of ECCDE are able to develop early concepts in the fields of science and technology as they play with their toys and other instructional gadgets such as computer-based simulated experiences and games. Mahuta (2007) stated that the aim of ECCDE is to foster the proper development of the children, identify and address their problems, harness their potentials, mould their character, enhance their learning, equip them for life, so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal, communal and global development in all ramifications of life.

Universal Basic Education (UBE) is educational reform programme of the Nigeria government that provides free, compulsory, and continuously 9-year education in two levels: 6 years of primary and 3 year of junior secondary education for all school -aged children. There are 3 components of the UBE programme, and these are: Early Children Care and Development Education (ECCDE) year Primary Education 3 year JSS Education

UBE Was Launched on 29 th September, 1999 by President Olusegun Obasanjo in Sokoto, Sokoto State. The UBE act 2004 signed into law in May 2004 by President Obasanjo took-off effectively with the signing of the UBE act in April 2004. However, the implementation stated in earnest in July 2005 with the appropriation of the UBE fund to the commission and subsequent disbursement to States. UBE is provided within the context of the 6-3-3-4 National policy on education. Indeed, its introduction is a reinforcement of the 6-3-3-4 policy on education. However, UBE could not take -off immediately after launch as it did not have legal backing. Nonetheless many UBE related activities were carried -out in the areas of social mobilization, infrastructural development, provision of instructional materials, etc.

The beneficiaries of the UBE program are follows: Children aged 3-5 years for ECCDE Children aged 6-11 + years for Primary School Education Children aged 12-14 + years for Junior Secondary School Education at the moment, completion of primary school doesn't equip a child with the necessary life skills to become self-reliant. Thus for any Nigeria child to be considered functionally literate and numerate, he or she must successfully complete 9 years of schooling. ECCDE it is not compulsory. What is compulsory is 6 years of primary and 3years of JSS Education. However, parents are strongly encouraging to registry their children in ECCDE Centers while government is expected to provide ECCDE Centers of good quality.

The implement of UBE programme resides with State Government in conformity with provision of the 1999 Constitution, and the relevant section of UBE Act 2004. The role of FGN in the implementation of UBE is to ensure quality control and maintenance of uniform standard as well as general coordinated of programme implementation. UBE programme is funded by the State and Local Government with the Support from the Federal Government through its intervention fund.

The Challenges in Implementing Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

The Use of English as Medium of Communication and Instruction: In order to protect all Nigerian languages and also to ensure that a child's development is appropriate for his or her environment, NPE provides a policy on the language of instruction. To this end, it is stated that the medium of instruction shall be the language of immediate environment for the first three years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject (Salami, 2016).

The first three years of life are a time when important connection are being made within a child's brain and are therefore a critical period in the development of language. Learning in mother tongue is crucial in enhancing other skills such as critical thinking, skills to learn a second language and literacy skills.

Lack of Competent and Qualified Teachers: The quality of the teachers determines the strength of any educational system and the value of the learners (Okoro, 2004 as in Ibhaze 2016). In recognition of the pivotal role of quality teachers in the provision of quality

education at all levels the Federal Government of Nigeria emphasized that teacher education shall continue to be emphasized in educational planning and development. This corroborate the submission in an Issue Brief by National Governors Association Centre for Best Practices (2010) that the knowledge and skills of early childhood care providers and teachers are critical factors in their delivery of high-quality developmental and educational experiences to young children. This underscores the importance of giving children the opportunity to learn under professionally qualified caregivers/teachers. Unfortunately, the situation is contrary in most pre-primary schools in Nigeria. In privately owned pre-primary schools, teachers with no training in ECCDE are often found in children classrooms while in pre-primary sections of government owned public schools, old female teachers with no qualification in ECCDE are often seconded to children classrooms (Ibhaze, 2016).

According to Akinrotimi and Olowe, (2016) whatever input is made into an educational system in respect of management, resources, facilities and array of instructional materials, will be of little avail if the teacher is unskilled, poorly trained or even ignorant. One of the major challenges confronting Early Childhood Care Education in Nigeria is that of unqualified, ill-equipped teachers and care-givers (Amadi, 2013). Most of these schools employ secondary school dropouts as teachers with the most qualified of the teachers being holders of Teachers Grade II certificate. Most of these schools employ secondary school dropouts as teachers with the most qualified of the teachers being holders of Teachers Grade II certificate. In a situation where most of the teachers in our early childhood institutions are unqualified and/or unprofessional, effective teaching and learning cannot be achieved (Ajayi, 2008).

Lack of Effective Supervision of the (ECCDE) Programme: The issue of supervision is vital in the process of implementing early childhood care education in Nigeria if success is to be attained. This is because no educational plan however excellent it may be can be effectively implemented if the school supervision is ineffective. To ensure effective implementation of any educational enterprise, supervision must be given adequate attention. In regards to ECCDE, Awino (2014) noted that it is important to supervise in order to gather information from children, caregivers, parents, communities, and general ECCDE environment. Supervision of ECCDE can be used to correct errors, modify practices where necessary and motivate as well as encourage all involved in its implementation there is the need to point out that laudable programmes with adequate facilities will eventually crumble if there is no supervision. Supervision needs to be tailored towards constructive criticism and guidance so as to develop a sense of confidence and competence in teachers, thereby leading to improvement. In this way, regular and appropriate supervision in early childhood care education will help in evaluating the programme as well as in decision-making processes (Sooter, 2013). Despite the immense benefits that supervision has to offer the ECCDE, the Nigerian ECCDE at pre-primary school level is not provided with these benefits as it is usually left unsupervised. This cannot allow effective implementation of ECCDE programmes at pre-primary school level in Nigeria.

The Ratio of Teacher to Pupils: One of the causes of poor implementation of ECCDE in Nigeria is the federal government's inability to enforce the policies. The policy position of teacher pupil ratio of 1:25 is also not implemented due to lack of supervision or monitoring. The teacher: pupil ratio of 1:25 with a helper/an assistant stated in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013) for the pre-primary class is likely to be a problem in the sense that the developmental characteristics and the needs of the pre-schoolers have not been considered. The children at this level are so restless, extremely active and full of energy to expend. They are still dependent on adults for almost all their basic needs – physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social skills – and therefore they require their full attention and diverse activities to help to satisfy their basic needs. It is not yet clear how smaller class sizes influence the quality of teaching in such centres. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2002) cited in (Ibhaze, 2016) condemned a similar practice in Ireland and stated that such a practice is unfavourable to child initiatives or to individual attention being given to the children (even on the part of the teacher, it would be frustrating and extremely difficult to achieve any worthwhile work). Ibhaze,(2016) then suggested a ratio of 1:4 for age three and a ratio 1:8 for ages four to six as providing opportunities for adequate individual attention to every child in the class and, hence, aiding optimal development of the children. If the ratio is not feasible in Nigeria it would probably be the result of a shortage of manpower. The highest ratio for this level ought not to exceed 1:15 with one assistant or 1:25 with two assistants. Higher staff-child ratios, referring to a smaller number of children per staff, are usually found to enhance ECCDE quality and facilitate better developmental outcomes for children. On the contrary, lower staff-child ratio in ECCDE settings will make caregivers to give less attention to children and they will not give optimal performance. This will in turn affect children as children may experience neglect and poor development in all domains. The lower staff child ratio is the scenario in Nigerian ECCDE at pre-primary school level (Sooter, 2013).

Conclusion

Considering the fact that the early years in life are the most important period during which children develop mental, physical, motor, health, nutritional, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional and social development and social abilities which they will need for future achievements. These periods of the early years need to be handled with all special and careful attention. All Nigerian children deserve the best, and education is the only legacy that can be given to set them on the road to optimal development. There is no doubt about the fact that the implementation of ECCDE in Nigeria, especially at the pre-primary school level, is faced with diverse challenges. However, what needs to come to mind is that there is no problem without solution. This is to say that there are ways out of these challenges. if ECCDE must be successfully implemented in Nigeria. There would be need to involve all bodies that are networking to provide ECCDE for the Nigerian child. This is particularly necessary as ECCDE is no longer a one man affair in the country but inter-sectoral activities involving the parents/family, education sector, health sector, Ministry of Women Affairs, the media, community members, religious groups and legal sector among others. If all these stakeholders put all hands on deck towards providing resources for ECCDE at pre-primary school level, the issue of lack of resources will become a history.

Counselling Implication

Early childhood education, the education given to children during their formative years, is not only to enable the children enjoy the childhood stages of their lives but also to shape their personality towards socially acceptable ones that will be beneficial for all (Salami, 2016). Since ECCDE at pre-primary school level is under the control of UBEC, the body should organize seminar for all pre-primary school caregivers/teachers, including those in private schools, to equip them with knowledge and skills needed for successful implementation of the programme.

Government should regulate salary of all teachers in early childhood education as well as school fees. The poor salary solely determined by respective exploiters of Early Childhood schools owners scare away many parents in sending their children.

Government subvention should be extended to private ECCE schools/proprietors as a way of ensuring moral commitment of the government in the regulatory activities. Model ECCE schools should be set up in rural communities under the auspices of the Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs).

Recommendations

1. There is the need for the Government to sustain ECCDE as emphasized in the provisions of National Policy on Education. The state Ministries of Education should be saddled with the responsible of ensuring quality control in the schools.
2. Schools be licensed to operate for ECCDE Only upon the satisfaction of prescribed quality guidelines including minimum infrastructural requirements.
3. There is need for State Ministries of Education officials to enforce the regulations laid down by the Federal Ministry of Education as regards to the provisions of early childhood education for improvement.
4. Effective monitoring units should be set up by Ministries of Education and provide with necessary maintained in both public and private preprimary institutions in Nigeria.
5. Government should regulate salary of all teachers in early childhood education as well as school fees to encourage teachers and parents.
6. Regular supervision and monitoring with stiff penalties for offenders will help to maintain the teacher-pupil ratio.
7. Effective measures should be ensured in the training of early childhood/pre-primary teachers through adequate scholarships, approving the mounting of such programmes in all Universities, Institutes of Education and Colleges of Education.
8. Teaching and learning materials like furniture for both teachers and pupils, television sets/computer systems, nature table/corners, toys and models, charts and well drawings and playing equipments like see-saw, merry-go-round, slides etc. should be made a vital provision in all learning centres for effective teaching and learning.

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