

Challenges in Implementation of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: The Way Forward

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) comprises essential programmes and activities which are critical to holistic development, academic success and future achievements of children. ECE is recognised by the federal government of Nigeria as a foundational and essential programme that Nigerian children must experience. This is why the government has given highly rated attention to it through various interventions that include formulation of policy documents and network of relationships among different sectors. Unfortunately, various challenges are facing the implementation of ECE in Nigeria. This paper examines the challenges that are militating against this important early education in pre-primary schools. Some practical ways to overcome the challenges are provided.

Keywords: early years, early childhood education, challenges, implementation

Introduction

Early years in life are widely accepted as the most important period during which children experience cognitive, language, perceptual, socio-emotional and motor development which they will need for future achievements and social functioning. This informs the reason why the periods of the early years need to be handled with all special and detailed attention. Estes (2004) has described the early years as a remarkable period of growth and development in the lives of children. In their submission, 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. In providing this foundation during the early years, Early Childhood Education (ECE) becomes a key actor.

Generally, ECE is aimed at promoting holistic development of children from birth to age 8. According to Olowe, Kutelu, and Majebi (2014), ECE 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. Sooter (2013) agreed with Mahuta (2007) by stating the aims of ECE to include fostering proper development of children, identifying and addressing their problems, harnessing their potentials, molding their characters, enhancing their learning and equipping them for life so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal, communal and global development. It is pertinent to note that all ECE activities and programmes are geared towards giving positive early experiences to children. This further underscores the importance of early years. The paramount importance of the early years is widely acclaimed in various international documents and developmental goals such as UN Convention on the Right of the Child, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals among others. The government of Nigeria is among the member states that ratified these documents and goals, and this has made the government to come up with various interventions which are geared towards providing quality ECE for Nigerian children.

As part of the interventions of the government in ECE, there was enactment of UBE Act (2004) which has an expanded scope that includes programmes and initiatives for early childhood education and development (UNESCO-IBE, 2006). The UBE programme made provision for every public primary school to have a pre-primary school linkage to cater for children, and this resulted in increased government ownership and participation in ECE provisions (UNESCO-IBE, 2006). Osanyin (2012) noted that there was the development of National Minimum Standard for Early Child Care Centers in Nigeria while. In the same vein, Oguntuashe (2010) reported the development of curriculum for in-service teacher training and IECD caregiver training manual. Another notable intervention is the development of a policy referred to as National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development that integrates interventions from various sectors to promote an integrated holistic approach to the development of the child (FGN, 2007). One other intervention that worth mentioning is the development of a unified early childhood education curriculum which was all encompassing and divided into two sections to cater for age 0-3 and 3-5 years respectively. Again, the federal government included ECCE programmes in curriculum of colleges of education. The most recent innovation seem to be the new National Policy on Education (2013 edition) in which the programme of ECE is brought under Basic Education in Section 2. It is now divided into two programmes namely Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE)

and Kindergarten Education.

Despite all these interventions and the efforts of the government, it is glaring that the implementation of ECE programmes is still affected by many challenges both at pre-primary school level and tertiary level. These challenges, as identified in this paper, relate to professional qualification of caregivers/teachers, resources, early childhood curriculum, professional development training, staff-child ratio and funding.

The Challenges in Implementing Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Professionally Qualified Caregivers/Teachers: It is widely acknowledged that early childhood educators with required professional preparation provide more developmentally appropriate, nurturing, and responsive care and education experiences for young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2007). This aligns with 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. In confirmation of this, Boyd (2013) reported the result of a study conducted in 2002 by National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD) and The Early Child Care Research Network (ECCRN) in which it was found that providers with BA degrees in ECE provided higher quality learning experiences for children in their care. 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 ECE are often found in children classrooms while in pre-primary sections of government owned public schools, old female teachers with no qualification in ECE are often seconded to children classrooms. Findings from various studies conducted by researchers in Nigeria have consistently confirmed this same situation (e.g., Olaleye & Omotayo, 2009; Amadi, 2013; Okewole, Iluezi-Ogbedu, & Osinowo, 2013; Osho, Aliyu, Okolie, & Onifade; 2014).

Resources: When resources are available for ECE programme at pre-primary school level, it helps the caregiver/teacher to nurture and support the development of young children, and to successfully implement curriculum. According to Chukwbikem (2013), the quantity and quality of resources available for any educational programme would determine schools systems capacity for the implementation of the type of educational programme. What this implies is that resources are critical to successful implementation of any ECE programme. In spite of the fact that resources are critical to successful implementation of ECE programme, they are not found in many Nigerian pre-primary schools, especially in the pre-primary section of public primary schools that belong to the government. Many researchers in Nigeria who have assessed the resources that are available for ECE at pre-primary school level have confirmed this same situation through the findings of their studies (e.g., Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri, & Dagunduro, 2011; Amali, Bello, & Okafor, 2012; Okewole, et al., 2013; Osho, et al., 2014).

Early Childhood Curriculum: Curriculum is the what and how of any educational enterprise. It is the vehicle through which any educational programmes can be successfully implemented. The ECE curriculum is an important written plan that includes goals for children's development and learning, experiences through which they will achieve the goals, what staff and parents do to help children achieve the goals and, the materials needed to support the implementation of the curriculum (National Centre on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL), 2012). The early childhood curriculum helps to ensure that staff or teachers cover important learning areas, adopt a common pedagogical approach and reach for a certain level of quality across age groups. These descriptions about ECE curriculum indicates that it is an indispensable material in the business of implementing ECE programme. Its indispensability spurred the government of Nigeria to see to the development and production of National Early Childhood Curriculum for Ages 0-5years by NERDC, with the support of UNICEF. This curriculum was launched in 2007. The unfortunate thing however is that this curriculum, since it was launched, is not found in almost all pre-primary schools in Nigeria. This is particularly true of privately owned schools. The non-availability of the National Early Childhood Curriculum for Ages 0-5years in pre-primary schools has been confirmed in findings of researches conducted in different states in Nigeria (e.g., Viatonu, et al., 2011; Amali, et al., 2012; Okewole, et al., 2013).

Professional Development: The teacher holds the key to successful implementation of any educational enterprise. This is why the federal government of Nigeria stated in NPE (2013) that no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2013). Jibril (2007) has submitted that 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. This is to say that whatever intervention the federal government of Nigeria makes to improve ECE will be of little effect if pre-primary school teachers are not given constant professional development. The professional development

training is particularly needed as the almost all the teachers in the ECE at the pre-primary school level are either not trained or trained in other fields not relevant to ECE. Goble and Horm (2010) have submitted that whatever a person's profession is, the need for professional development is universal because professionals need to continually enrich their knowledge and increase their sense of professionalism over the course of their careers so as to implement current research based practice. According to Goble and Horm (2010), early childhood professional development brings to the forefront the significance of the early years for children's learning and development and highlights the central role early childhood educators play in children's successful outcomes. Unfortunately, the pre-primary school teachers in Nigeria in both public and private school seldom receive professional development training. In fact, some researchers have confirmed that the teachers lack professional development training (e.g., Olaleye & Omotayo, 2009; Viatonu, et al., 2011). This lack of professional training for the teachers is liable to worsen the problems of implementing ECE in Nigeria. This is because almost all the teachers in Nigerian pre-primary schools are not professionally qualified.

Supervision: To ensure effective implementation of any educational enterprise, supervision must be given adequate attention. In regards to ECE, Awino (2014) noted that it is important to supervise in order to gather information from children, caregivers, parents, communities, and general ECE environment. Supervision of ECE can be used to correct errors, modify practices where necessary and motivate as well as encourage all involved in its implementation (Awino, 2014). Usually, the changes that result from supervision of ECE programme can strengthen the implementation of such ECE programme. Supervision in ECE leads to the holistic development of children, enables efficient implementation of curriculum, checks whether the objectives of the programmes have been achieved, promotes maintenance of basic standards, identifies problems and constraints, motivates, enriches and promote personal as well as professional growth all those involved (Awino, 2014). Despite the immense benefits that supervision has to offer the ECE, the Nigerian ECE at pre-primary school level is not provided with these benefits as it is usually left unsupervised. This cannot allow effective implementation of ECE programmes at pre-primary school level in Nigeria. Researchers have consistently lamented this lack of supervision in ECE (e.g., Osakwe, 2011; Nakpodia, 2011; Sooter, 2013).

Staff-Child Ratio: Higher staff-child ratios, referring to a smaller number of children per staff, are usually found to enhance ECE quality and facilitate better developmental outcomes for children (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *undated*; Huntsman, 2008). When there is higher staff-child ratio, caregivers are able to interact better with children, they experience less stress and they are able to provide more supports to different children's developmental domains. Huntsman (2008) noted further that higher staff-child ratio makes children become more co-operative in activities and interactions and children also tend to perform better in cognitive and linguistic assessments. On the contrary, lower staff-child ratio in ECE 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 ECE at pre-primary school level. This has been reported in several papers and researches on ECE (e.g., Sooter, 2013; Osho, et al., 2014). In fact, in a report series to the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, it was specifically reported that classrooms in early childhood development (ECD) centers in Nigeria are crowded, with an average of more than 130 children per classroom in the North (The Good Planet Foundation, 2013).

Funding: Funding needs to be given maximum consideration because it is very crucial to achieving success in any educational enterprise. In ECE, adequate funds need to be made available for provision of many resources and activities which include stimulating materials for teaching, training and re-training of staff (teachers and caregivers), enrichment and sensitization of programmes through regular workshops, monitoring, feeding, immunisation, supervision and inspection, report writing, publications, school meals and training manuals among others (Alabi & Ijaiya, 2014). This indicates that the importance of funding to successful implementation of ECE in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The sad thing however is that Nigerian ECE is ridiculously underfunded. This could be linked to the low budgetary allocation to the education sector in the nation. Perhaps, this is the reason for the report of The Good Planet Foundation (2013) on Nigeria that spending on essentials such as textbooks, instructional materials, in-service training, operations and maintenance is inadequate. The underfunding of ECE at pre-primary school level in Nigeria has been document in several academic papers and researches (e.g., Osakwe, 2011; Amali, et al., 2012; The Good Planet Foundation, 2013; Alabi & Ijaiya, 2014).

The Way Forward

It is not gainsay that a lot of caregivers/teachers in ECE at pre-primary school level in Nigeria are not professionally qualified. Even as the situation may be, there is a way forward. All the caregivers/teachers at the pre-primary school level in Nigeria would need to undergo professional development training from time to time.

This is the only way by which ECE at pre-primary school level can be successfully implemented in Nigeria at the moment. Even though many of the teachers may be qualified in their respective fields which are often not in ECE, they would need the professional development training to equip them with necessary skills and knowledge required for effective implementation of ECE at the pre-primary school level. This training would help the teachers to understand the significance of the early years for children's learning and development and it would highlight the central role they are to play in children's successful outcomes. In relation to funding, these stakeholders would also need to be effectively involved. This is particularly important as it is often said that the federal government alone cannot singlehandedly provide all financial supports that the educational system requires. Each of the stakeholders would need to device means of making fund available for ECE especially at the pre-primary school level. Whatever the government provides would therefore be strengthened by their own contributions. In regards to supervision, all the stakeholders would also need to be involved since they are working towards specific goals of ECE. However, there would be need to give them appropriate orientation on how they can carry out effective supervision of ECE programmes in their specific areas.

Again, evidences have shown lack of relevant resources for ECE at pre-primary school level. This also is not a problem that does not have solution. There would be need to involve all bodies that are networking to provide ECE for the Nigerian child. This is particularly necessary as ECE 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 ECE at pre-primary school level, the issue of lack of resources will become a history.

Likewise, there is a way out of the challenge of not having the ECE curriculum in pre-primary schools. Meanwhile, it should be noted first of all, that the government produced and launched the National Early Childhood Curriculum for Ages 0-5 years in 2007 with believe that copies would be available to pre-primary schools in order to provide uniform ECE programme for all Nigerian children. This plan of the government did not change but could have been improperly executed by those saddled with the responsibility of disseminating the curriculum to schools. To overcome this problem, there would be need to resort to using the internet. The curriculum should be uploaded unto to the website of UBEC and information should be circulated to all school administrators about this. It should be made mandatory for all pre-primary schools, both public and private, to ensure that the curriculum is available and used in the school.

The challenge of staff-child ratio can also be tackled. It should be realized that the federal government has given mandate to some colleges of education to run pre-service training for those interested in specializing in the field of ECE. Some of these colleges have already produced one or two sets of graduates and there are universities such as University of Ibadan, which have been producing graduate in pre-primary education for over two decades. There would be need therefore to employ more professionally qualified ECE teachers from those already produced by the colleges and universities.

Conclusion

There is no doubt about the fact that the implementation of ECE 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. Some practical steps, which have been put forward in this paper, would need to be given adequate consideration by relevant stakeholders if ECE must be successfully implemented in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Since ECE at pre-primary school level is under the control of UBEC, the body should organise 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 ECE programme. Such training should be handled by ECE experts. Apart from this, UBEC should see to it that more professionally qualified teachers with ECE certificates are employed to guide children's learning and development in pre-primary schools. This should also be made mandatory for privately owned schools. In addition, the commission should organise a forum where all stakeholders in ECE would be enlightened about their roles towards the implementation of ECE. Such forum should discuss how the stakeholders could assist in making resources available and in funding and supervision of ECE. UBEC would need to employ a more practical approach to disseminating the ECE curriculum. One way by which this can be done is to upload the curriculum on the website of the commission, where it can be downloaded. After doing this, the commission should go ahead to inform the public about its availability on the website and schools should be monitored to ensure that the curriculum is available and used. Finally, the commission should organise training programme for caregivers/teachers on how to interpret and implement the ECE curriculum.

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