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EARLY CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT
Early childcare education is a starting point for a child's holistic development. This paper examined the strategies for improving and developing early childcare education. The paper employed theoretical and conceptual clarification. Since early childcare education is the education given to the children before transition to primary school, determining the best strategy for effective delivery of early childcare education is an issue that should be of concern to all stakeholders. Children of this age grades are expected to be in kindergarten, pre nursery, nursery and crèche. This is their rights as enshrined in Universal Rights of Education analysis of those strategies such as pupils/teachers friendly, use of African cartoons, pupils/facility friendly strategies and the like revealed that early childcare have many points in common and are built on coherent visions of how to improve on human and society by helping children realize their full potentials. This paper portrayed children as active authors of their own development strongly influenced by nature that opens the way towards growth and learning. Many benefits such as improving social skills and holistic development are mostly needed at least age. Poor funding, inadequate facilities and lack of trained personnel are factors militating against the effective running of early childcare education. Stakeholders of early childcare education should fund and support the programme and staff by organizing workshops and supplementary training programme.

Keywords: Early Childcare Education, Development, CIPP Model, Strategies, Improvement

Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in the supply of manpower needed for the development of the individual and the nation. It is an integral part of man from birth to death and that later education (primary, secondary and tertiary) is dependent on the Early Childcare Development Education (ECCDE). Hence, the need for its inclusion in the National Policy on Education by Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1977. This is to expose children to school-like environment that will be safe under proper educational managers, teaching them rudiments of numbers,

shapes, colours and sizes in their local languages through play activities.

Early Child Care Education (ECCDE) is the education given to younger learners before the age of entering primary education. ECCDE according to Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2014) given to children aged 1-4 years in preparing their entry into primary school. It is commonly referred to as the nursery or the kindergarten (KG) programme, which is usually in 3 tiers, namely; KG 1, KG 2 and KG 3. The head teacher is the administrator who does the internal supervision and management of other personnel in the centre. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) in 2013 prescribed the minimum standard for the running of ECCDE centres in Nigeria among which are follows: Child-size chair (one per child) and one round table per 4 children, mats, locally made beds, mattresses covered with Macintosh and bed sheets, Chalkboard /classroom (movable or fixed), gender -neutral charts /posters/pictures, cupboard, shelves for children's items (enough to hold 25 children's items e.g. water, bottle, food flask, bags), caregiver table and chair, display table or shelf and wall clock. the records should be made available are: admission and withdrawal register, child folder containing biodata, health record ete, attendance registers, log book (incidences/occurrences), teachers record book, visitors' book, time book (sign in and out note), movement books for both teachers and children, continuous assessment/test records, personnel records, PTA minutes book, ledger, inventory of school/property, staff meeting minutes book and school diary, etc.

It has some guidelines, which should be followed in the management of early childcare education. However, this type of education is mostly dominated by private entrepreneurs where they really try to make the children very comfortable so that the environment will be like a home outside home in accordance with the NPE, which states there should be smooth transition from home to school (FRN, 2014), because at this stage in life, the children may be glued to their homes and parents. Perhaps to help them adapt to their new environment will mean showing them interesting and attractive things such as bright colours, toys, games, wall papers, TV, rhythms, teddy bears, lyrics and many more so that they can forget their homes at that moment. However, it appears that most ECCDE in public schools do not seem to have these facilities to achieve that smooth transition by NPE especially in rural areas.

Early Child Care Education can be traced to the efforts of prominent European education experts like: John Amos Comenius (1590-1690), J. J. Rousseau (1782–1788), and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1751) (Maduewesi, 2013). These experts championed the right of children to early education, adding that good early childcare education helps students to develop their full potentials. In developing these full potentials, the role of adequate facilities and early childcare educators cannot be overemphasized in teaching and learning processes. Facilities could help early child care educators to teach some basic concepts better to the children. The progressive and effective management of Early Child care Education in Nigeria has some factors militating against it. United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF, 2015) identified some problems like underfunding and lack of learning facilities, adding that its challenge is on getting more children into school and developing the schools to become child friendly thereby offering good quality education. Olubor (2017), in her studies on educational resources as a source of societal inequality; it was a case of deployment of non-early childcare educators from primary section to Early Child care Education section. Nigeria, with over 31 million children under age 5, adopted ECCE in its National Policy on Education 2004 and integrated 1 year of pre-primary into Universal Basic Education in 2013. Yet access remains low: only 35.6% of children

aged 3-5 attend organized early learning programs, with stark rural-urban and regional disparities. Northern states report enrollment below 15% in some LGAs. This communication highlights systemic gaps and outlines pragmatic strategies for scaling quality ECCE nationwide. These ought not to be, it is however interesting to note that despite the challenges of human and school facilities in Early Child care Education, in Edo state, at least in 3 local government areas like Egor, Ikpoba-Okha and Oredo local government areas, a total of 108 Early Child care education centres are currently in operation.

The National Policy on Early Child Care Education

In the current National Policy on Education (FGN, 2014). The objectives of Early Child Care Education include, among others:

i. providing a smooth transition from the home to the school;
ii. preparing the child for the primary level of education;
iii. providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work;
iv. inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities, etc.
v. teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes forms, etc. through play,
vi. ensuring that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the local community;
vii. ensuring that the main method of teaching in Early Child care institutions will be through play;
viii. regulating and controlling the operation of Early Child care education, ensuring adequate training of staff and provision of essential equipment.

Benefits of Early Child Care Education

According to Onanwa and Wisdom (2020), some benefits of early childcare education are improved social skills: Young children love to play and communicate with their mates and the preschool environment gives them the opportunity to do just that. Students who receive quality early children education in Nigeria are more confidents and inquisitive, which causes them to perform better. It helps to build a child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional proficiency, which prepared them for life challenges. According to Thomas (2016) teaching Mathematics, enough early helps children to develop initial and necessary skills. Through interactions with other children, children develop a positive mindset and perception of themselves. A child at 3 years will display a love of boldness and articulation – this is as a result of teaching early child care education. The length of time during which preschool children concentrate, has always been a concern for educators. Nevertheless, if young children are taught early childcare education in tender age, it will help enhance their attention span.

Stufflebean's CIPP Model Framework

This paper is hinged on the Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model framework propounded by Daniel Stufflebean in 1966. The model focused on programme improvement. It addresses all stages of education programme from planning to implementation. It is also a method used to create new course of action for more effective practices. Relating this model to the work, CIPP appraises and helps to understand how each component contributes to the both overall successes of Early child care education and pupils learning outcome which will be showcased in primary school level. Relating this framework to this work, the context here is the objectives according to NPE which is supposed to be achieved through the adequate early child care educators, facilities, pupils (**Input**) instruments and

learning environment. Using the proper teaching method (**Process**) in the classroom will eventually lead to the achievement of the objective and the (**product**) are children ready to enter primary school level in line with the context (**Objectives**).

Conceptual Framework

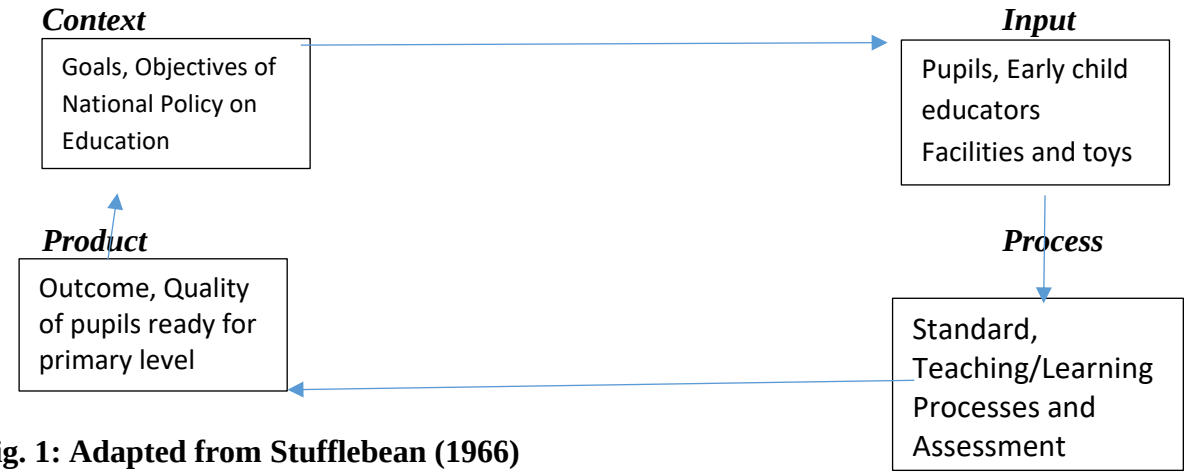


Fig. 1: Adapted from Stufflebean (1966)

Brief History of Early Child Care Education in Nigeria

The first Early Child Care Education was founded by Robert Owen 1777-1858 in Scotland. He was concerned about impoverished children and became an advocate of educating children outside the home. He began the infant school movement through these schools, he encouraged large group of children to engage in activities with natural and concrete objects, he provided a bridge between the home and school. He started with children aged 1-4 who were cared for while their parents and older siblings worked **(**Obiweluozor, 2015).

In Nigeria, it started with the colonial masters during the early 1960. Consequently, the need arose for educational administrators, educational planner, policy makers as the then military government of Nigeria, realized the need for pre-primary education in the country and gave official recognition to it in the National Policy on Education (NPE). Pre-school prepare children for primary school by introducing educational concepts like colours, numbers and the alphabets. It became a prominent feature in the educational system in Nigeria during the late 1970's hence its inclusion in the NPE in 1977 and revised in 1981.

Today, even in Edo State, Nursery schools have come to stay. Some have uniforms, they carry empty school bags, wear sucks and sandals with lunch box just to make it look like a school environment.

Problems of Early Child Care Education in Nigeria

A lot of factors militate against the progress of primary education in Nigeria. Some of these factors include:

Quality and Qualification of Teachers

The quality of the teachers determines the strength of any educational system and the value of the learners (Okoro, 2014). In Nigerian early childcare institutions today, the teacher quality is generally low. It is only a few of the nursery schools especially those owned by educational institutions, private companies and wealthy individuals that can afford to engage the services of university graduate teachers and holders of Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) qualifications, competent and committed teachers and are also capable of retaining such teachers. Most others employ a few NCE teachers (if any at all), who are usually underpaid, while others employ mainly Grade 2 teachers and secondary school leavers with school Certificate or General Certificate (ordinary level) qualification. In a situation

where most of the teachers in our early childcare institutions are unqualified and/or unprofessional, effective teaching and learning cannot be achieved.

Inadequate Supervision

This level of education is suffering abandonment, no routine supervision and hence no recommendations to the ministry of education. Obiweulozor and Momoh (2013) stated that the importance of external and internal supervision cannot be overemphasized. For Early child care education to remain relevant, attention must be given on the ways administrative duties are carried out as well as teaching and learning.

Infrastructure and Access

Many early childhood centers, especially in low-income and rural communities, operate in inadequate buildings with unsafe or unsuitable learning conditions. Some schools lack basic classrooms, child-friendly furniture, clean water, electricity, sanitation facilities, and secure playgrounds. Young children require safe, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate environments, but overcrowded classrooms, damaged buildings, and poor hygiene conditions can negatively affect health, attendance, and learning outcomes. In many developing countries, children may attend classes under trees, in temporary shelters, or in poorly ventilated spaces, limiting effective learning.

Appointment of Head Teachers

Appointment or selection of head teachers in primary schools for some time now has been politicized. In most cases, it is influenced by the government in power and as such friends and relatives who may not be capable are appointed to the detriment of the effective administration of the school. This sort of political interference affects the achievement of the objectives of primary education since appointments are done not by merit but by favouritism. This, however, could lead to conflict in the system. Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) assert that favouritism by authorities as regards school administrator can breed conflict in the school system.

Underfunding

Inadequate funding has been a major challenge in the smooth running of Early child care education in Nigeria. Budgetary allocation to education in Nigeria has been very poor, meanwhile. No administration in recent times had got near to UNESCO's 26% budgetary recommendation. Continued underfunding of education sector threatens the development, growth, and other administrative activities in the school. Competent educators would not accept the low salary offered in Nigeria. This force pre-show into cutting content, hiring unqualified teachers that may not be suitable for the job. Onanwa and Wisdom (2020) assert that the issue bothering on limited resources both at the local government level accounts for non-payment of salaries, dilapidating building and lack of infrastructure in Early child care schools that hosts the pre section. (Adamu, 2007). He said that most of the buildings, especially in rural communities where very uncomfortable, inadequate, or in a terrible state.

Lack of Policy Implementation

The policy as laid down by National Policy on Education is never implemented, a round peg in a square hole is the order of the day. Educational experts are never appointed in the management of early childcare education. Research finding by Dialoke et al (2017) showed that factors such as corruption, inadequate human and material resources, lack of continuity in government policies and clarity of purpose contributes to policy failure in Nigeria. Apart from receiving recommendation from stakeholders in education, the implementation of the policy by relevant authorities has not been encouraging. The policy implementation, however, is yet to

meet the expectation of the Nigerian government.

Language Barriers

Language barriers are a major challenge in early childhood education because language is the foundation through which young children communicate, understand instructions, build relationships, and develop literacy skills. When the language used in early childhood centers differs from the child's home or community language, learning can become confusing, stressful, and less effective. This issue is especially common in multilingual societies, migrant communities, and countries where official school languages differ from indigenous or local languages. Early childhood is the period when children develop foundational language, vocabulary, listening, and pre-reading skills. If instruction begins in an unfamiliar language too early, children may face delays in literacy development because they are learning both content and a new language simultaneously. This can weaken school readiness and later academic achievement. Children who do not understand the language of instruction may become withdrawn, anxious, or reluctant to participate in class discussions, songs, or play activities. Since social interaction is central to early learning, language barriers can limit peer relationships and social-emotional development.

Attitudes toward Children with Disabilities

Cultural beliefs and social attitudes significantly influence how early childhood education is perceived, accessed, and supported in different communities. In many parts of the world, these beliefs can either encourage participation in early learning or create barriers that limit children's access to quality education during their most critical developmental years. In some communities, parents and caregivers believe that young children are too small to benefit from formal education. Early childhood education may be seen as unnecessary, and children are expected to remain at home until they are older. This belief reduces enrollment in preschool programs and delays early cognitive and social development opportunities. Cultural stigma or misunderstanding about disabilities can lead to exclusion of children with special needs. Some communities may believe that such children cannot learn or should be kept at home, preventing them from accessing inclusive early childhood education services. In low-income households, children may be expected to contribute to family income or domestic work. Cultural acceptance of child labor reduces school attendance and prioritizes short-term economic survival over long-term educational benefits.

Connectivity and Resource Issues

Public nursery schools in remote villages or rather economically backward schools face serious issues in keeping up with modern and attractive toys. Many pupils who were found sitting at home during the covid-19 pandemic were given no exposure. Village schools were completely short down without plans to keep the children mentally busy. Parents may have friend but they are not trained in that dimension. This calls for government intervention otherwise pupils in such areas would get little or no basic education in the future.

Lack of Co-Curricular Activities

Activities here play a part in both the physical and mental development of the child. A sound body is a sound mind". Kariyana et al (2012) opined that, co-curricular activities have a positive effect with pupils' academic success. Early child care schools in Nigeria have large playground good for physical grooming, yet management lack dedication to engage pupils in all the required physical activities that would enhance their mental capacity.

Negligence on the Part of Government

Of all the measures that Federal Government undertook in order to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of early childcare education, the only one it has effectively accomplished is the granting of permission for private efforts in the provision of early childcare education in the country, with virtually less or non-participation by the public sector. This, in addition to lack of supervision to ensure the maintenance of standards, has led to increases in numbers of early childcare education institutions in the country. Significant provision is yet to be made in public or private teacher training institutions in the country for the production of specialist teachers, it is doubtful if it can attract many clients, as neither the Federal nor any state government has established any nursery or early childcare schools where graduates of such a programme can be employed. Work in private nursery or early childcare institutions would probably have no attraction for specialist in early childcare education teachers because of low wages and job insecurity associated with teaching in such institutions (Ejieh, 2016).

Strategies for Improvement

Some of the strategies to improve the standard of Early Child Care Education in the country includes organizing workshops, seminars, conferences, role-playing, and supplementary training programmes both for the teachers and head teachers. Other strategies for the elevation of the system are x-rayed below:

Adequate Supervision

The supervision of early childhood education centres has been over the years bedeviled by some challenges, which possess some level of impediment in the successful supervision of instructional delivery and school system. The NPE (2014) stipulates that one of the government roles in early childhood education is to supervise and control quality of ECCDE centres. The process of monitoring instructional activities as well as the infrastructural facilities available in schools ensures the smooth operation of an educational institution. Supervision of school programmes should be done in quarterly bases to improve teaching and learning. It should help teachers perform better in areas where it is properly utilized and assesses the output of schools in line with educational expected outcomes.

Parent and Community Sensitization

Parent and community sensitization is a vital strategy for improving early childhood education because families and local communities are children's first and most influential learning environments. Sensitization involves educating parents, caregivers, and community members about the importance of early childhood development, quality preschool education, health, nutrition, and active participation in children's learning. When parents and communities understand the value of ECE, they are more likely to support school attendance, create stimulating home environments, and advocate for better educational services. In many communities, especially in low-income or rural areas, parents may view early childhood education as unnecessary or may not fully understand how the early years shape brain development, language acquisition, social skills, and future academic success. Sensitization programs help families recognize that learning begins before primary school and that quality early experiences significantly influence lifelong outcomes. This awareness can increase preschool enrollment and reduce delays in child development.

Enforce Standards and Integration

Enforcing standards and promoting integration are essential strategies for strengthening early childhood education systems globally. While expanding access is important, access alone does not guarantee quality. Clear standards ensure

that all children receive safe, developmentally appropriate, and equitable learning experiences, while integration connects education with health, nutrition, child protection, and family support to address the whole child's development. Together, these strategies improve consistency, quality, and long-term outcomes. Without standards, ECE services can vary widely in quality, with some centers lacking trained teachers, safe buildings, or age-appropriate teaching. Poor-quality early education can undermine child development rather than support it. Enforcing standards protects children from neglectful or ineffective environments and promotes consistent developmental outcomes across different regions and providers. Enforced standards also promote equal access by requiring inclusive practices for children with disabilities, marginalized populations, linguistic minorities, and those in poverty. Integrated systems can identify vulnerable children early and connect them to support services before learning gaps widen.

Scale Community-Based Low-Cost Models

Community-based low-cost models are locally organized early childhood education programs that operate with minimal financial burden while maintaining essential educational quality. They may include home-based learning centers, village preschools, faith-based centers, parent-led cooperatives, mobile classrooms, or community halls adapted for child learning. These programs are often supported by local volunteers, caregivers, NGOs, or trained paraprofessionals rather than relying solely on expensive formal school systems. These models encourage active involvement from parents and community members in school management, teaching support, nutrition programs, and child protection. Strong community participation improves accountability, sustainability, and awareness of child development. Parents also gain knowledge about health, nutrition, and early stimulation practices.

Continuous In-Service Teacher Training Programme: If ECCDE educators are to effectively and efficiently perform their functions, it becomes imperative for them to be retrained in new skills and modern methodology. The National Policy on Education (2014) states that no level of education can rise above the quality of its teachers. Before the new graduates on specialist education are employed, training and retraining of non-specialist teachers in the primary section can commence so that they will be useful when redeployed to the nursery section. A continuous training programme in institutions of learning is necessary to enhance the caregivers' skills, knowledge, and experience. This is beneficial as it provides opportunities for increasing the number of trained and qualified teachers at all levels of education. Training teachers with current and up-to-date materials and technology will improve the standard of ECCDE education in the country.

Improved Teachers' Welfare: Poor teachers' salaries, bonuses, as well as irregularities in payments, were observed as factors affecting KG teachers' commitment to their job (Raharfo, 2008). Good housing, money, and a better working environment are motivating factors for teachers. Good welfare packages will serve as motivators to high productivity. Fair wages attract qualified and dedicated teachers and also will change the mind of young graduates towards the teaching profession. Annual review of salary will reduce incessant strike action in schools. Until the government treats teachers fairly the education output remains the same.

Allocation of Sufficient Funds: To lift the standard of our education from decadence, the government through the ministry of education must make available adequate funds for infrastructural development such

as classrooms, electricity, equipped libraries, playground, pipe-borne water, etc. Adequate financing is vital in education as there are many compelling education needs like the purchase of equipment, instructional materials, in-service training programmes, seminars, workshops, and conferences for teachers (Nwiyi 2012). Finance is required in order for education system to actualize the millennium Development Goals. Allocation of funds to the education sector should at least meet up to UNESCO's minimum suggested standard. Education is the key to the development of a people but money is required to perform the needed magic.

Recommendations

Based on the issue at stake, the following recommendations were made:

1. The government should recruit support staff like nursery assistant, nannies and janitors.
2. There should be laughter and genuine expression of affection and friendship in an early childcare centre. Children should be offered a variety of opportunities to express themselves.
3. Caregivers/head teachers' welfare should be taken seriously for them to give their best in the administration of pre-primary education in Nigeria.
4. There should be internal and external supervision of pre-primary education to ensure rules and regulations are carried out as expected.
5. Government through the Ministry of Education should see that the UNESCO 26% suggestion of national budget goes to education as this will enhance effective school administration.
6. Cultural integration in curriculum by incorporating local language, traditions, songs, and stories helps make learning more acceptable and relevant to the community.
7. Educating parents and community leaders about the importance of early childhood education helps change misconceptions and encourages participation.
8. Introduce school feeding programs across all ECE centres with health services (immunization, check-ups) to promote hygiene and sanitation education.
9. Introduce age-appropriate educational technology to train teachers in basic digital skills and provide solar-powered or low-cost devices in rural areas.

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