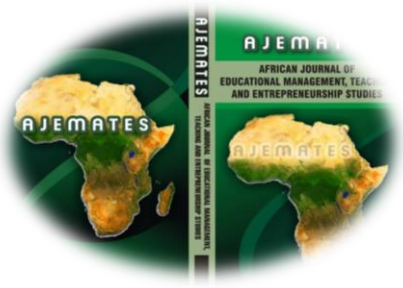
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INNOVATIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE EDUCATION: ATEMPLATE FOR GROWTH AND SUSTAIANABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood and care education is a general but unique field in education. As a field, it has acquired numerous labels such as, Montessori, crèche, daycare, play group, pre-primary education, etc. As important as this foundational aspect of education is, it is worrisome that instead as this fortifying the system, governments in Nigeria at all level appear to have abandoned and rejected this formative stage of our education and, subsequently, handed it over to the whims and caprices of the private sector who, in turn, see it as a purely commercial venture. This paper, therefore, examines the lackadaisical attitude of governments of the early childhood and care education visa-viz the innovations by stakeholders being put in place for this pre-school system as a leeway to sustainable development. The paper recommended, among others, proper monitoring of the conditions at the various pre-primary school to sustain standards, drawing up a uniform curriculum for the pre-primary institutions, irrespective of the label and appellation they bear.

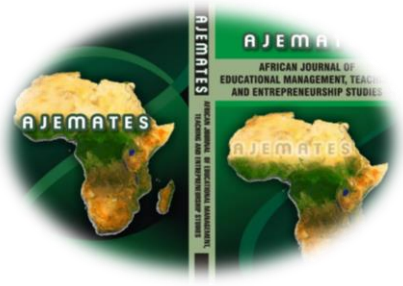
Keyword: Innovations; Early Childhood and Care Education; Sustainable; Development.

Introduction

Schools are a recognized agent of socialization all over the world. It is indeed where children spend most of their time during the formative period of their existence on the planet earth. From the primordial time there have been streams, classes and schools clearly carved out for pre-primary education. Hence, the National Policy on Education (2014) remarked that early childhood/ pre-primary

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education is education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. This type education goes by diverse name and label some which include crèche, nursery, pre-primary, kindergarten, Montessori, day-care and play group. The general purpose of pre-primary education;

a) To affect smooth transition from home to school;
b) Prepare the child for the primary level of education;
c) Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parent are at work (on the farm, in the market, offices, etc);
d) Inculcate social norms;
e) Develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit;
f) Learn good habits especially good health habits;
g) Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play. (NPE, 2014);
h) Inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art , music and playing with toys etc;

Seeing it from the same lens, Mahuta,(2007) stated that the aim of early childhood education is to footer proper development of the children, identify their potentia , address their problems, mould their character, enhance their living and equip them for life so that their actions are channeled towards positive personal, communal and global development in all ramifications of life.

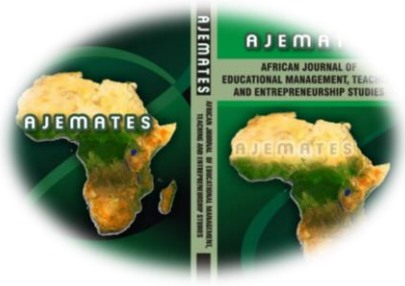
The Concept of Early Childhood Care and Education

Early childhood education refers to a facility outside the home, set up to provide care and support for the development and education of very young children from birth to the age five years. It could be viewed as a facility to help meet the basic needs of the child for good health, nutrition, security, affection, interaction and stimulation for social, emotional, psychological, physical and cognitive development (UBE, 2012).

According to Ashimolowo (2015) Early Childhood care and approximately zero to five years (0-5) which are deliberately designed to stimulate and support their mental,

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physical, emotional, language and social development. Maduewesi (1999) however, defined early childhood education as a semi-formal education arrangement usually outside the home, whereby young children of about three years are exposed through play like activities in group setting to mental, social and physical learning suited to their development level until the mandatory age of Government approved formal schooling. Also, Meieobi (2006) sees it as a formalized educational process to which children between the ages of two and half (21/2) years to five and above (5+) years are subjected to a designated pre-school institution.

Finally, in this regard, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2000) perceived early childhood education as "Services for children from birth through age eight in part-day and full-day group programmes in centers, homes and institutions, kindergartens and primary schools and recreational programmes.

After going through the length and breath of these definitions, a keen reader must observe the general agreement on key points namely:

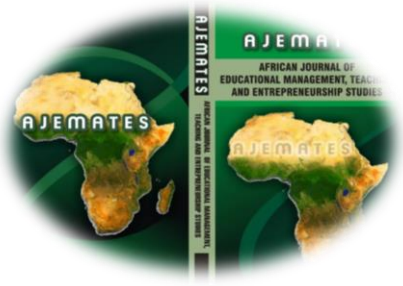
a. That it is education for children between 0-5years;
b. That the aim is to develop them mentally, socially, physically, linguistically, and morally, etc;
c. That it is mostly held outside the child's home setting;
d. It is meant for smooth transition from home to formal school settings and
e. The education is through activities methods which include play, dance, music, songs and other related activities.

The Concept of Innovation with Emphasis on ECCE

Innovation as a concept connotes the introduction of something new, the injection of new ideas, new ways of doing things. Innovation can also be the modification of something that was already in existence for better and effective functionality. Innovation is the act of introducing something new, making changes, aimed at improving the existing pattern or condition of doing things to make them more efficient and more effective. Innovation may not always mean a clear cut break from an existing

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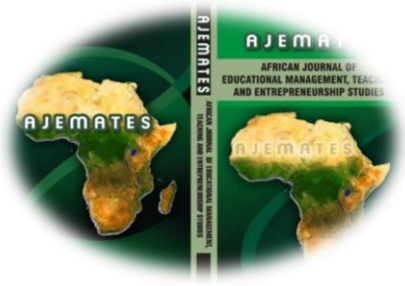
practice. It could be a combination of both aspects of the old and latest discoveries in an area also as to improve the entire system for greater productivity (Achunine, 1998).

Early Childhood Care and Educational innovation have reached a very high crescendo in all aspects of the schools system especially in eastern Nigeria. This is mainly because of the observed problems in the education system. For instance, some of the problems led parents to withdraw their children (wards) from public schools and register them in the privately owned early childhood care education centers. This is because

a. Governments at all levels are paying lip service to early childhood education. This lips-service starts and stops with policy system as enunciated in the National Policy on Education and reiterate din the official documents establishing the Universal Basic Education (UBE).
b. Inadequate funding is another problem of the early childhood Care education. This is because governments of all levels have cleverly abandoned the establishment and the day-to-day running of early childhood Education in the hands of private business men and women who run these schools purely for commercial purposes. Government officials who do not care however only visit such schools during inspections where they are "settled" with "brown envelops and the owners continue as usual.
c. A major problem with early childhood care education as operated in Nigeria today is lack of standards in curriculum, teaching staff and the structure of such schools. Confirming this observation, Umaru (2013) pointed out that "That Federal Ministry of Education and National Educational curriculum development Council have not unified the syllabus of early childhood schools, rather each state and school operates its own curriculum. For instance, all early childhood centres offering French language and computer studies do it for the sole purpose of public

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relations and advertisement, no more no less.

d. Early Childhood Care and Education teachers are supposed to be men and women with the requisite skills, competence, attitude and passion for working with pre-primary school pupils. However, what is obtained, at present, is hiring of secondary school certificate holders as teachers. These are young people who have no formal training in child psychology, adolescent psychology, cognitive language development, social and moral development, etc.

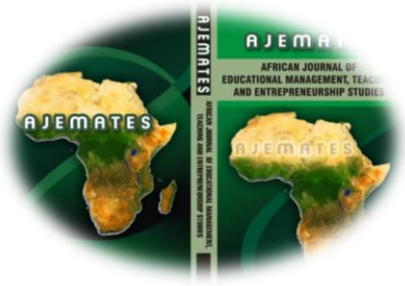
   These young employees accept to do this job not because they have passion for children, but simply because there is acute unemployment in the nation and they need to keep body and soul together. Hence, they eat their food and snacks, abuse them and at times administer corporal punishment on these innocent children.

e. Nowadays, these pre-school children are transported from their homes with the school bus. This arrangement is between the school management and the parents. The problem is that a bus that has the capacity to carry fourteen adults is made to carry more than its capacity. As a result some of the children are compelled to sit on the engine cover. In the same vein, most of them fight and scratch each other at the back and cry out with only the adult driver who is busy driving the vehicle without much concern for why the children are crying.

f. The care-givers and their assistants are young boys and girls and /or old women who are so tired and under-paid. They are so unmotivated that during feeding these children, instead of using the ingredients, flasks and cutlery provided by the individual parents, the non-professional care-givers find it easier to make big quantity of food from few parents and use the same face towel, feeding bottles, spoons, water bottles to feed the entire children in a whole class. In doing this, they spread infectious diseases like cough, mumps, blisters, small pox,

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chicken pox, sore throat, catarrh, etc.

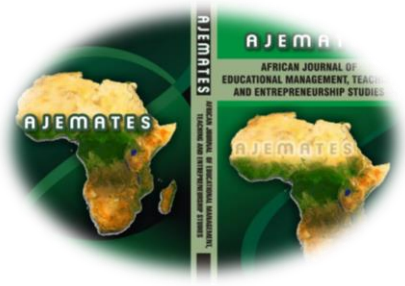
g. The need for early childhood education and the non-chalant attitude of governments at all levels towards this level of education has made the private sector to use all make-shift buildings as take-off site for early childhood care education. Some teach the pupils under mango trees while others are in unventilated car parks and anywhere they can get space. This ultimately does not promote a positive school climate.
h. Early childhood care education sponsored by few wealthy individuals with good structures and positive school climate charge exorbitant fees. Their fees are so high that only the well-to do in the society can afford them. For instance, the few good ones in big cities like Abuja, Port-harcourt, Lagos, etc. charge as high as N350,000 per term. This amount is above the annual income of the minimum wage of public or civil servants in Nigeria. Thus, their babies/children are automatically disqualified from attending such "good" schools.
i. As a final comment in this regard, most of these day care and early childhood education centres are mostly found in the urban areas and only few with little or no standards are found in the rural areas, where they still operate as "Ota Akara" (eaters of fried beans paste). Their teachers speak the native dialect of the community where the school is located. They mostly operate at the village meeting place called "***Obi***" with no facilities for waste disposal, etc.

Innovation in Early Childhood Care Education as a template for Sustainable Development in Nigeria.

Over the years, early childhood education has witnessed a number of innovations in curriculum advancement, staff development and physical structure enhancement. However, it is believed that if these innovations are properly articulated, well-documented and generally implemented in all the early childhood care education centres, they

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will definitely help in maintaining standards across board. This will ultimately usher in the much needed sustainable development beginning with the child, his immediate family and, of course, throughout the Nigerian society. These innovations include the following:

a. Caregivers Behavior and Attitude

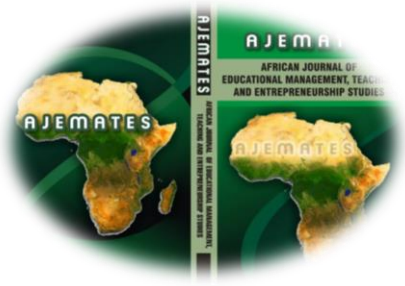
Caregivers are supposed to see their work with the babies as a vocation and, therefore, carry out their duties with passion, empathy, commitment and diligence. They must lead by example, knowing full well the human beings, especially children between the ages of zero to five (0-5) years learn by observing and imitating those thing they observe. Caregivers are therefore, to encourage the pupils' active and lively participation through arranging the environment to be vibrant while they (the caregivers) will be enthusiastic. The present caregivers, however, still see their work with the children as a means of earning a living. They Should upgrade their behaviour and attitude to work to depicit the calling to do this work.

b. Activity-Centered Learning

Educationists and developmental psychologists posit that caregivers should depart from the traditional teacher centered of subject learning to activity-centered learning. In this case, the preferred activity must be initiated by the pupil while the caregivers follow as a participant-observers. In this type of innovation, physical activities are emphasized as well as graduated and systematic guidance in oral/verbal expression. Aesthetic appreciation should be cultivated and developed through sketching/drawing with coloured pencils, love for music through observation and listening to recitation of letters of the alphabet and numerals via television and DVD players. At this point, according to Grauban (1974), the child is the starting-point, the centre and the end.....His development, his growth is the ideal..... To the growth of the child all studies are subservient.... personality, character is more than subject matter. Not knowledge or

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information, but self-realization, is the goal...

c. Team Caregiving

Team teaching is said to take place when three or more teachers as well as teacher-aides jointly share the responsibility for directing and evaluating the learning of a common group of students. The innovation in early childhood care education is where three or more caregivers share the responsibility for guiding, directing and caring for a group of pre-primary children. Team caregiving is intended to secure all-round watch over a group of pre-primary pupils. Emphasis is on making sure that the babies are taken good care of till the arrival of their biological parents.

d. Inclusive Education

Inclusive education as a concept emanated from the opinion of some educators who, for years, questioned the rationale for continuous segregation of children with special needs (Eberechukwu, 2016). Inclusive education is an educational setting where every child belongs, is accepted and supported by his or her peers and other members of the community in the course of having his or her needs met (Pambot, 2006). Ozoji (2006) put it more succinctly when he posited that inclusive education is the programme that allows children with special needs to learn together with other children in regular school with appropriate support.

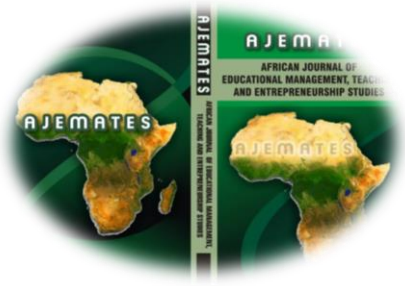
Among others, inclusive education helps all children, not just children with special needs, understand the importance of working together and fosters a sense of tolerance and empathy among them. This innovation is well practiced in most early childhood care education centres.

e. Open Classroom

This is a classroom arrangement that provides a child with the opportunity of learning at his own pace in his own way and essentially via intrinsic-motivation. At the different early childhood centres, babies' tables and chairs are arranged in orderly manner within the class room. Many interest centres with objects, games, learning aids, computers, and toys

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are displayed to catch the interest of the learners/pupil (Achunine, 1998).

f. Resource centre

Educational resource centres encourage the production of care-giver-made and home-made resources. They are also displayed in such a way that the selection of the resources is achievable with ease. These resources centres are bay-centres in terms of arranging learning materials such as toy section, provision section, library section. These innovations are most found in the early Childhood Care Education Centres owned by government tertiary institution. It is therefore suggested that it be made compulsory for all schools running early childhood centres.

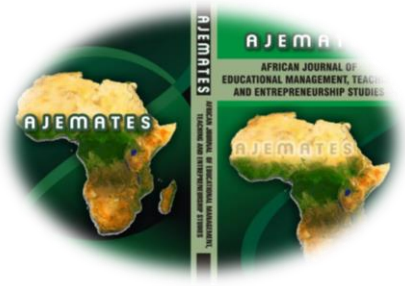
g. Continuous Assessment

The Federal Ministry of Education Handbook (1980) defines continuous assessment is "a mechanism whereby the final grading of student in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of behaviour takes account in a systematic way of all his performances during a given period of schooling". The innovation is that continuous assessment areas of emphasis in Early Childhood Care Education Centres include intelligence, aptitude, interests, attitude, achievements and co-operation, Mental acuity, recuperative ability, dexterity and tolerance.

It is upon this backdrop that sustainable development will remain not only elusive but a mirage unless we go back to the drawing board and nip the problem in the bud by giving Early Childhood in Care Education backbone financially and otherwise in zest, the method and means as well as the political and visionary will to implement sustainable development. This is because sustainable development simply put is the continuous development of the total person. This entails the development of the human person beginning from birth morally, physically, mentally, intellectually and of course, politically. This is in tandem with the position of UNESCO Medium Term Strategy 2008-2013 in Maclean (2008),

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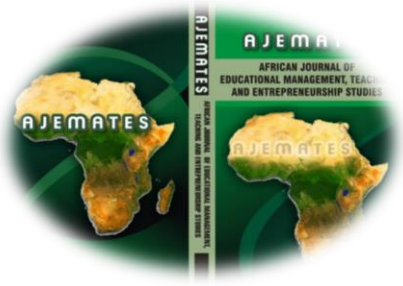


which states that "development and economic prosperity depend on the ability of countries to educate all members of their societies and offer them lifelong learning". An innovative society prepares its people not only to embrace and adapt change, but also to manage and influence it. Education enriches cultures, creates mutual understanding that underpins peaceful societies. UNESCO is guided by upholding education as a human right and as an essential element for the full development of human potentials.

High quality and relevant education will lead to sustainable development if it can be provided at the early childhood care education levels. This is because at that pre-primary school age the brain of the children are so tenacious that group, encode and as well as retrieve values that can come from curriculum that contains innovations like infant stimulation, value education, accountability education, peace education, child development, hospitality education, entrepreneurship education, right to life education, etc. This is the foundation needed at the pre-primary school level to become good leaders in future. This becomes more meaningful when we remember that Achebe (1983) had this to say, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership". This leadership problem can never abate unless we focus our attention on early childhood education whereby governments at all levels contribute to the development of suitable curriculum, supervise and control the quality of such institutions, etc. This will eventually transform to responsible leadership and ultimately sustainable development in all spheres of life.

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Conclusion

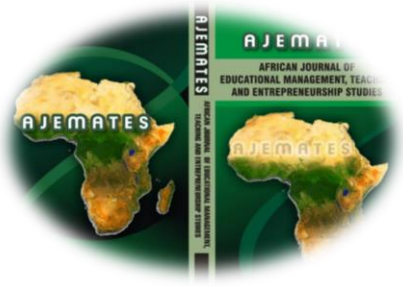
Early childhood care and education is the most viable option for the provision of sustainable development in Nigeria. Their curriculum content and programme of activities if well developed, documented and implemented across all levels of pre-primary and primary schools all over the federation irrespective of labels and nomenclature such as day-care, crèche, nursery, kindergarten, play group, pre-primary, primary and Montessori. If government can take over control through funding and proper supervision to ensure standard all over the federation. Nigeria and her ruling class need to focus attention to early childhood education without going back, compromise, surrender or prevarication, if sustainable development in infrastructure, economy, education, tourism, entertainment must be attained.

Recommendations

1. The Federal, State and Local governments should pay serious attention to the implementation of policies and programmes of Early Childhood Education as stated in the revised National Policy on Education.
2. Moreover, they (governments at all levels) should ensure proper monitoring of the conditions at the various pre-primary schools to sustain standards.
3. Also, curriculum planning bodies and agencies such as the National Education Research Centres (NERC) and their counterparts at the state levels should draw up uniform curriculum content for all the pre-primary schools throughout the federation for the sake of uniformity.
4. The present scattered curriculum used by top pre-primary schools in the country should be collected and collated. Missing links like value, peace, language, entrepreneurship, hospitality education, etc should be included to make it more robust in the programme of activities.
5. Governments at all levels and stakeholders should continue to organize seminars, workshops, conferences for teachers at the pre-primary level to enable them acquire the pedagogical know-how for teaching at that level.

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6. Religious leaders, institutions and royal fathers who give awards should use such awards to show that the dignity of man through labour instead of giving such awards to the highest bidders.

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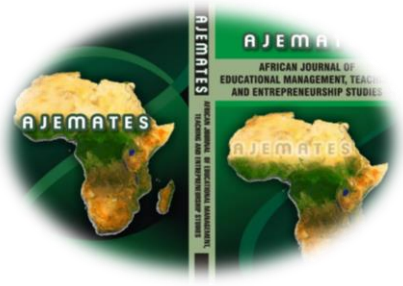
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