

STRATEGIES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper examines the strategies for the implementation of early childhood education policy in Nigeria. Early childhood education is the overall development of the child socially, physically and intellectually. It is a major transformation in the live of the world's youngest children, especially, in relation to school. Early childhood education is increasingly being confronted with number of challenges which demand urgent attention. These challenges tend to be characterized by poor nutrition/poor health, stunted growth/mental retardation, with the consequences of high attrition in schools, lack of skills, low literacy level and underdevelopment in the society. There is then a great concern about how the problems can be controlled so as to meet the needs of all concerned, as well as laying a solid foundation for the education systems in Nigeria. Consequently, the concept of early childhood right to education and national policy on childhood education are examined. Finally, the paper discusses implementation policy and measurement for the educational efficiency.

Key Words: Early Childhood Education, Implementation, Strategies

Introduction

Early childhood education is conceptualized as the overall development of the child socially, physically and intellectually. It encompasses the care, development and education of children below the age of 60 years. Early child education is seen as the first phase in life time of continuous learning and experiencing from birth to old age. It is the foundation for a lifelong learning.

The official recognition given to pre-primary education in the National Policy on Education (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004)

combined with a number of factors to give rise to an unprecedented expansion in the provision of child care and pre-primary education institution or nursery schools in the country. Nearly all the pre-primary education in the country, however, is provided by private proprietors. Some of these establishments go by the names 'day care centers' or 'playgroups' and take care of the children while their parents go to work or go for other engagements but most of them are nursery schools for providing early childhood education. In some instances a group of parents hire and pay a teacher to take care of their pre-school age children and teach them rudiments of numbers and alphabets. This practice which has almost faded away was mainly for reasons of economy in the early eighties and for the fear by some parents that their children would contract some diseases in the day care centers and nursery schools many of which were sub-standard. Variations in provision make the registration of these institutions somehow difficult for Ministry of Education officials.

Nursery schools are located in various places and buildings – campuses of some universities and colleges, premises of some industrial and business organizations, mosque and church premises, residential buildings some part or the whole of which are hired for use as nursery schools only or both nursery and primary schools, and so on, while some are hired for use up mainly in some towns as full-fledged nursery and primary schools with their own building and premises. The physical structures vary widely in terms of quality and aesthetics from one establishment to another. So do the facilities and equipment.

The nursery schools that engages the services of qualified teachers, especially those owned by private individuals usually charge high fees while those make their services affordable to a great majority of parents that charge relatively low fees usually employ unqualified teachers who receive low pay is a strategy used by many proprietors to makes their services affordable to a great majority of parents and at the same time maintain a satisfactory profit margin.

Although the National Policy on Education prescribes that the child in the pre-primary institutions should be involved in active learning, the document detailing guidelines on provision and management of pre-primary education is silent on the curriculum contents of such an institution (Federal Ministry of Education, 1987). In the absence of such guidelines and copies of the curriculum for pre-

primary education, proprietors and teachers resort to curricular of their choice. This resulted into crises in capacity building, maintenance, enrolment, infrastructural, ethical and financial crises. The paper, therefore examine strategies for the successful implementation of early childhood education in Nigeria.

Child Rights on Education

Human right is dated back to the Geneva declaration of the rights of the child, adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. The unprecedented violation of human right after the Second World War led to the awareness for the global recognition and protection of human rights. The first effort to organize and protect the human rights of all people has the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) passed by the United Nations in 1948. In 1957, the British Government Commission propounded law for the protection of Minorities. Subsequently, since the adoption of the UDHR, a significant number of international legal instruments have been put in place to protect and promote human rights. These include:

- the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights;
- the international Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
General Assembly Resolution 22005 (xxi) of 16th Dec, 1996;
- the Covenant on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- the convention of the Right of Child (CRC); and
- convention Against Torture and the Cruel, Inhuman of Degrating Treatment or Punishment (1987). General Assembly Resolution 22005 (xxi) of 16th Dec, 1966.

Furthermore, Article 25, (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Nigeria (1982) states that: "All persons shall have the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities and with a view to achieving the full realization of that right (a) basic education shall be free, compulsory and available to all (b) secondary education in its different forms.... Shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education (c) higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in

particular, by the progressive introduction of free education....” (Republic of Nigeria, 1992:27). Furthermore, sections 6(2) and 8(1) of the children’s Act (1998) on the rights state that: (i) every child has the right to life, dignity, respect, leisure, liberty, health, education and shelter from his parents; (ii) no person shall deprive a child access to education, immunization, adequate diet, clothing, shelter, medical attention or any other thing required or any other thing required for his development respectively.

Objectives of Early Childhood Education

The FGN (2004) in Section 2, page 11 refers to “pre-primary education” in this document as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 plus prior to their entering the primary school. The FGN (2004) identifies the responsibilities of government at this level as the promotion and training of qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable curriculum and supervise and control the quality of such institutions. Sub-sections 13 of the policy enumerate the purpose of pre-primary education thus:

1. effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
2. prepare the child for the primary level of education;
3. provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the market, offices etc);
4. inculcate social norms;
5. inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc;
6. develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;
7. learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
8. teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc through play.

The FGN (2004) announced its responsibilities and strategies for implementing pre-primary education as:

- encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education;

- make provisions in teacher education programmes for specialization in early child-hood education;
- ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will;
- develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages;
- produce textbooks in Nigerian languages;
- ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this;
- regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education;
- set and monitor minimum standard for early childhood care centres in the country; and
- ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers association in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities.

Strategies for Implementation of Early Childhood Education

The survival of the Nigerian child and future generations is in an efficient early childhood education. Strategies for successful implementation of efficient early childhood education involve:

- development of adequate curricula;
- NGOs and community participation;
- due process mechanism registration;
- maintenance of minimum pupil teacher ratio;
- government policy on education;
- adequate founding;
- effective school administration;
- service delivery to children;
- support and educate care givers;
- strengthen national resources and capabilities;
- effective monitoring and assessment;
- conducive environment;

Development of Adequate Curricula

Early childhood curricula must be adequately balanced. It must include personal data, physical development, social development, emotional development, mental development, language development, breast feeding, weaning, food and nutrition, harmful practices, childhood diseases/ailments and their preventions, personal hygiene, community hygiene, safety measures and first-aid. In using the curriculum, the caregiver is called upon to involve the children in planned activities through play. Flexibility in the order of use of the topic is highly advocated, provided the environment is conducive for the topic. The curriculum involves implementation of planned activities at the community level with community support and involvement, particularly the basic needs on health and nutritional care, psychological and social development.

NGOs and Community Participation

The FGN (2004) at section 11 (109) declares that the financing of education is a joint responsibility of the federal, state and local governments and the private sectors. In this connection, government welcomes and encourages the participation of local communities, individuals and other organizations. Community participation promotes the ability to control and manage resources so as to meet the social, cultural and economic needs of the populace. It is a tool for community empowerment and as an instrument for the preparation of the citizen. Community participation must entail academic integrity. Academic integrity requires that academic community:

- should advance the quest for the truth and knowledge;
- should seek to ensure fairness in institutional standards, practice and procedures;
- should promote respect among students, staff and other educational stakeholders; and
- should uphold high standards of conduct in learning and teaching;

Effective mobilization of the community must address the following issues:

- Identification of the needs of the community
- Establishment of rapport with personalities in the community.

- Identification of the power structure within the community.
- Mapping out strategies for mobilization.
- Identification of the human and material resources within the community.

The roles and responsibilities of a community would include provision of appropriate accommodation facilities, planning activities and allocating resources, provision of financial support, supporting and planning of training programmes, provision of teaching /learning /play materials and formulating alternatives to the problems.

Government should organize a forum for all potential partners in education – aid agencies, private sectors, the media, principals, NGOs, philanthropists, PTAs, to meet periodically, discuss and plan for cooperation and assistance in education. Private organizations should be encouraged to go into Equity participation of Joint Venture in Pre-Nursery Education in various business ventures. This would bring efficiency, profitability and direct management. A bill aimed at improving academic integrity in education be presented to the National Assembly. The Act should recognize the five fundamental principles of integrity as value, fairness, respect, responsibility and trust.

Due Process Mechanism Registration

The interested proprietors and proprietresses have yet to get their schools registered through the required process. Since the government allows private participation in the provision and management of education, the would be proprietresses/proprietors need not wait until the body saddled with registration responsibility begins to hunt for them. The specimen of what government requires to meet up with the standard in a particular level of education is disclosed to interested proprietor that follows required process. This will even guide against deviation from government expectation and standard. The school proprietors/proprietress who duly registered their schools will be protected from untimely closure of their schools, as schools would be closed down due to non-compliance with Government recommendations. There is therefore, an urgent need to entrench BMPIU (Due Process) into the management of pre-nursery education for proper accountability and effective management of the country' available resources. The mission of the BMPIU is to use the Due Process

mechanism to re-establish and sustain an open, transparent and competitive federal procurement system that is integrity-driven, upholds spending within budget and ensures speedy implementation of projects in order to achieve value for money outcomes without sacrificing quality and standard. For successful implementation, project feasibility and design should be completed before embarking on procurement and award. Technically, competent and integrity conscious officials in the ministry should be identified and assigned procurement planning. If Due Process is well and honestly administered, it will surely lead to restructuring, re-orientation, reawakening, rejuvenation and rebirth of the Nation's contemporary issues.

Maintenance of Minimum Pupil Teachers Ratio (PTR)

At the point of admission, Proprietor/Proprietress has to consider the spaces available and the staff strength of the school. The admission of minimum number of students based on the spaces gives the teacher opportunity of adequate control of students in the classrooms. It also affords the teachers opportunity of knowing students individually (i.e. individual differences). Learning takes place in conducive environment and when classroom becomes congested, ventilation is disrupted, effective learning cannot take place.

Government Policy on Education

Educational policy serves as government guide in practice and management of education. Every Proprietor/Proprietress is expected to be current about educational policy as well as Government policy on recommended texts to be used in schools. This does not mean there should not be supplementary reading books. Any additional textbooks, however, have to fulfil the essence of schooling i.e. for learning and character.

It is necessary to have national policies that support families and young children. Policies need to be in place that encourages family-sensitive, social service delivery systems and employment. Strategies include analyzing current policies, getting involved in the process for creating new policies, facilitating the implementation of current policies that re supportive of children and families.

The workshop, *Early Childhood Development in African Implementation of Quality Care, Development and Education for young children* (2008) helped countries in Africa, including Nigeria develop action plans to move efforts beyond the policy stage and towards the implementation of initiative, and cost-effective programmes. The initiative is to address diverse linguistic, cultural and social contexts in order to create holistic and integrated programmes.

Special interactive Radio Instruction programme must put in place as a low-cost means of improving equity, access and quality pedagogy through the use of technology.

Adequate funding

Adequate funding must be provided to expand access through a pre-primary year and developed an expanded public works programme to help deliver ECD programmes. With the provision of counterpart funding provided by the Nigerian government, both at national and state levels, for early childhood programmes, donor agencies such as UNICEF increase their own funding, and expand their operations to include many more communities throughout the country. With the support from UNICEF, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (a federal government agency) undertook the training of caregivers, and developed training manuals and pre-school readers to improve the quality of delivery of early child care and development programmes in the '90s. ETF should devote special fund for the early childhood education. The objective of this is to upgrade facilities in order to promote core activities of teaching and learning.

Effective of School Administration

Effectiveness is determined by productivity, stability, morale, turnover rate, degree of integration, maximization of individual potentialities, and values contributed to the society. There is therefore the need for school administrators to examine themselves so as to discover where they belong, i.e. whether they are effective or ineffective, and then make amendments in order to salvage their school organization in particular and the educational system in general. Indicators to determine effectiveness of school administration include academic performance, discipline, teachers attitude to work, perception by parents/community, school facilities and management efficiency.

Service Delivery to Children

The strategy focuses on the activities for children from the time the child is born through the transition into early primary grades. Programme focused on maternal health during pregnancy are also appropriate. The strategy is aimed at child survival, child care, socialization, overall child rehabilitation. These objectives could be achieved through a preschool or child care centre, neighbourhood home, in a community centre, in the market place. It may also be provided through the media, radio and television.

Advocacy and sensitization visits should be undertaken to get states and communities to establish early child care centres nationwide. The centres/ facilities so established should be of low-cost and community-based with minimal or no-contributions from parents, especially in poor rural communities and amongst urban-poor families. Predictably, such centres were established in market-places, churches, mosques, and in homes, to take care of the needs of children aged 0-5 years, for early care and stimulation. Such centres are encouraged with the provision of locally made toys and books by UNICEF. In some states, the early child care centres were linked to local primary schools, to ease the transition of the child from home to school.

Support and Educate Caregivers

The objectives is to create awareness of the importance of the parents/family members, caregivers, teachers/educators, siblings and elders. This is aimed at creating awareness, increase knowledge, change attitudes, improve practices and enhance skills. Approaches in achieving these objectives include home visiting, parental education courses, child to child and family life education. This will ultimately enrich the immediate environment within which children live. Efforts should be made to help prepare women physically for motherhood. This involve providing young women with information on procreation about their health needs in preparation for having children.

Strengthen National Resources and Capabilities

Individuals and agencies institutions involved in carrying out childhood education requires financial, material and training resources that will provide them with the capacity to plan, organize, implement and evaluate early childhood efforts.

Human resource development include the development of training and support systems for the administrative staff paraprofessional, researchers, professionals, supervisors and direct service providers.

Also, upgrading or changing the knowledge, skills and abilities of those currently working in the early childhood education. The outcome of the training are to increase knowledge, enhance skills, change behaviours, strengthen and sustain organizations, enhance local/ national resources and develop local materials.

Human resources could be achieved through organizational development training, pre- and – in service training of caregivers/ teachers, experimental/demonstration, collaborative cross-national research projects and action research.

On the institutional capacity to meet the needs and aspirations of the children, schools should add programmes within the school that address children's needs, these include create readiness programmes (intensive preparation of the child for school), provide tutorials, provide health and nutrition services.

Effective Monitoring and Assessment

For ECD programme to be successful there must be quality assurance. Monitoring and evaluation should be carried out on a regular basis in order to sustain and improve quality. The research and planning unit of the ministries of education should be well equipped to meet the challenges of the ECD programme. Monitoring and evaluation will ensure that there is proper utilization of funding and accountability, the infrastructures and learning materials are adequate, effective teaching and learning takes place, curricular content is adequate, teaching methods used, qualified teachers are used in the programme, admission criteria are strictly adhered to and appropriate instructional materials are used.

Conducive Environment

To ensure a conducive environment for IECD implementation in Nigeria, NERDC with support from other stakeholders developed the following essentials IECD tools.

- A national Minimum Standards for ECC Centres in Nigeria (2005), to streamline the various categories of facilities and operations in ECCE,
- A national Integrated Early Childhood Education Curriculum for ages 0-5years (2005), which took the right-based and life-cycle approach as well as made special provisions for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) and HIV/AIDS orphans and/or those living with the HIV virus,
- A national Caregivers Manual for ages 0-5years (2006), in which the roles and skills required for caring and stimulating the 0-3 and 3-5 age cohorts of children are fully discussed, in the official language and major mother tongues to ensure grassroots applicability as well as capture the benefits of multilingual education,
- A national Manual for Local Toy Making (2007), to facilitate easy access and availability, and
- Strategy for IECD implementation and monitoring through National, State and Local government IECD Consultative Committees of intersectoral stakeholders
- Proposed establishment of Schools for ECCE in the nation's Colleges of Education would further strengthen pre-service training and provision of human capital for ECCE delivery in Nigeria
- Proposed massive IECD Advocacy campaigns and Capacity Building for parents and Caregivers in 2007 have been adopted to further ensure community sensitisation towards the survival, growth, early

stimulation and learning for Nigerians aged 0-5 years, to achieve head start for children enrolling into the nation's compulsory 9-year Universal Basic Education Programme for the achievement of the EFA goal.

- Guarantee of a 5% of the federal intervention funds for UBE for ECCE delivery in the states

Conclusion

Early childhood years set the foundation for life, Federal, States and Local governments should recognise ECCE as a fundamental human right for both privileged and underprivileged children.

Consequently, all governments and communities should establish special centres for all Nigerian children to be nurtured free of charge between ages 0-5 years to complement the roles of parents and other child caregivers;

Recommendations

Inter-ministerial forum of stakeholders from relevant ministries including that of education, health, women affairs, and social services sectors should meet urgently to confirm its acceptance of the entire pre-school years 0-5 for ECCE, own the national IECD Policy and promote intersectoral interventions on the Nigerian child; Partnering with international and local donor agencies to achieve massive dissemination of minimum standards for ECC centres, IECD curriculum, Caregivers Manual, Toy making manual and toys would ensure qualitative ECCE delivery in Nigeria Aligning ECCE policy with other national and sectoral development policies like NEEDS and NAPEP would leverage resources and promote ECCE integration.

Public, private and service providers/operators of IECD programmes should ensure that they patently infuse and mirror the value-orientation component of National Economic Empowerment & Development Strategy (NEEDS)/SEEDS/LEEDS; and parental education

should be supported by all stakeholders so as to improve the early stimulation of children 0-3 years; Various local governments in the country should come to the aid of rural areas as far as the provision of pre-primary education facilities is concerned. Matching grants could be given to communities to set up such institutions.

NERDC should mobilize local/international support to strengthen capacity of IECD operators and caregivers (parents, teachers, siblings etc) through information sharing, The Federal and State Inspectorate Services are to ensure that all IECD centers adhere strictly to the Minimum Standards- i.e. for ECC centers, IECD curriculum, and Caregivers Manual; Minimum standards for ECE programmes should be developed nationwide. ECE programmes should be innovative, through child directed teaching and learning process.

All stakeholders should make every effort to further increase enrolment, retention and easy transition to primary school while the production and distribution of culturally appropriate stimulation materials should be built up;

Capacity building workshops should be organized to train or retrain preschool teachers so as bridge the gaps in and discrepancies between teacher qualification and experience. Early childhood education teachers should have a minimum of NCE qualification with specialized ECE courses. Federal and state agencies should fund curriculum development, field-testing and assessment for ECE.

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