
Challenges of Childhood Education in the 21st Century: The Way Forward

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Abstract

Childhood education is a critical stage in the educational development of the child. The national policy on education stipulated that the child should be provided with diverse basic knowledge for entrepreneurship skills, wealth generation and educational advancement. However, the provision of early childhood education has been plagued with so many challenges. One may observe that the problems stated in this paper are known ones. Yet until a problem is solved no matter how long they have existed, remains a problem. As these challenges persist, the implementation of early childhood education tends to be a mirage. The paper therefore exposes some factors militating against the implementation of early childhood education programmes such as inadequate funding, non-involvement of caregivers in curriculum planning amongst others and in order to curb these challenges, specific suggestion such the involvement of caregivers in curriculum planning process and provision of adequate funds to early childhood care and development centres amongst others were also highlighted in order to surmount these challenges in the 21st century.

Keywords: Challenges, Curriculum, Childhood Education, Adequate Funding, Supervision

Introduction

The childhood programme is as important as any other level of education. It is the cradle of formal education. The negligence observed in any area of its establishment and operation can mar the development of children and subsequent educational attainment in near future. Be it as it may, the content of what the centre present before the children is worth supervising. As stipulated, the National policy on education is explicit on how childhood education should be established, managed and controlled. The NPE (2014) clearly spell out the objectives of early childhood education is as follows:

- a. to effect a smooth transition from home to school
- b. prepare the child for primary level of education

- c. to provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the markets, offices etc.)
- d. to inculcate social norms
- e. to inculcate in the child, the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, arts, music and playing with toys etc.
- f. to develop a sense of cooperation and team- spirit
- g. to learn good habits, especially good health habits, and
- h. to teach the rudiments of numbers, letters colours, shapes, form etc through play.

Despite that government has indulge relevant authorities and agencies such as UNICEF, WORLD BANK, SUBEB, LEA and the ministry of education to partner with them to see to the reality of effective running of childhood education in the country, there seems to be a challenge of ensuring that these policies are implemented to the letter. Based on these assertions, the paper will look into certain key challenges of childhood education and advance way forward for each. To highlight these challenges and proffer relevant solution to them, the paper shall consider the following:

- Concept of childhood education
- Significance of childhood education
- Domains of learning in childhood education
- Challenges of childhood education
- The Way forward

Concept of childhood education

The growth of living organism's spans from birth through adulthood until the time of death. The human race is not void of such milestones. The development of human begins from the womb (prenatal), through official birth and progresses on. Thus, as people develop there is every need to develop various stages of human development so as to make ready individuals in the society who will make meaningful contribution to the overall development of the society in which they live. From the above statements, the necessity for the establishment of childhood education cannot be overemphasized.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2006) sees early childhood education as the cradle of development from birth to eight (8) years. At childhood stage of life, the goes through the most rapid phase of growth and development (Echebe, 2019). The whole of their system is at alert to function effectively to enable various milestone reach its climax. The brain develops faster at this critical stage. As nature will have it, this stage forms the basis for other levels of development. Any abnormality at this level can mar the progress of other stages in children's life. The stages ensure the development of social, cognitive, emotional, moral and psychological skills in children. These skills development poses great implication for educators, caregivers and parents respectively.

Domains of learning in Childhood education

The childhood education content is systematically arranged along the three domains of learning, of the curriculum. The objectives of early childhood education as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) form the content and focus of the Early Childhood Education curriculum. There are key areas which the curriculum point to which encourages skills acquisition of preschoolers. These

subjects which shall be briefly considered are; numeracy, literacy, music, arts: drawing and painting, and play.

- **Numeracy** is one of the domains stipulated by the NPE (2014). A domain that entails counting of numbers and carrying out simple arithmetic. Childhood education offers children this opportunity to ensure their proper integration and socialization into the larger society where these concepts are used daily for transactions.
- **Literacy** is another key area of emphasis which the curriculum spells out. Children need to be aware of the world around them. To do this, they should be able to possess adequate the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Before a child transits from the childhood level of education to post-primary level, these skills must have been very prominent and observed in the child.
- **Music** – it is a strong way of communicating ideas and feeling to people. Children have strong bond to music. They do not hesitate dancing at the hearing of any sound that pleases them. It is an activity that interest and sustains their attention in the classroom. Music is fun-filled and humorous. It is an activity that allows for creativity expressions especially through the dancing and its steps and styles; add aesthetic values and sense of aesthetic judgment to children. It has a way of introducing concepts and skills into children. In the music curriculum, socialization, language, emotional release, sensory stimulation and psychomotor skills are well developed.
- **Drawing** – drawings right from the crèche is very fascinating to children. Children find joy with initial scribbling on their book or whatever material given to them for such purpose. As they grow in the classes, their fine and gross nerves are developed for further work. They start drawing with crayons, marking, pens, pencils, chalk and other materials at their disposal. In doing these, children express and develop creativity and creative tendencies with if given consecration will make them shine brighter. It might be of interest to note that children present very excellent drawings after class activity. In their houses, children based on the drive to create new thing through drawings draws on anything they see—walls, seats, pots, cars, books and other materials they can reach out to.
- **Painting** – another thing that interest children is painting after they have drawn the pictures or an already drawn picture. It is an activity that delights young children. Painting is an experience that is created and permanent in children. Arinze et. al (2019) opined that painting experience can be in form of outdoor, indoor, wall board, fences, flat surfaces such as table or floor. Painting materials such as painting brush, colours, water, paper etc. are provided for children to aid the creative process in drawing.
- **Play-** play is the highest development of the child. Take away play from children and you will deprive them of basic milestones to growth and development. It is a basic aspect of child's curriculum that cannot be ignored in the Early Childhood Education. Play promotes mastery of skills in children. Play involves physical activities which is very inventive. It inventive nature makes it quite creative. Through play children develop great potentials and creative abilities. Chief amongst them are social, emotional, intellectual/cognitive, physical, manipulative and psycho-motive skills.

Significance of Childhood Education

The childhood education is significant in many senses. The provision offered children as enshrined in the National policy on education overlaps all the domains of children's development. Echebe (2016) outlines the significance of early childhood education thus: physical development of children, social interaction/ socialization of children/ possession of aesthetic and cultural experiences, possession of materials for experimenting activities, programme of co-operation between parents and teachers and affective development of children.

Physical development: early childhood education has been seen as the only programme that has paid attention to the physical need of developing children. Through programme, children are given opportunity to explore the environment, play with peers and develop physical skills. Parents and caregivers should endeavour that children are not malnourished. Children should also be given opportunity to cultivate good feeding habits, adequate leisure time and maintain rest and reason sleep periods.

Social interaction/ socialization: through early child care centres, children are inculcated with basic norms acceptable in the society. Skills that enhance inter-personal relationship are also fostered in the programme. Children are taught ways of practicing politeness and other skills worthy of acceptance by the larger society. This is one of the things early childhood has been able to achieve in children. The preschool centres allow children to play and interact with others.

Possessing aesthetic values: children are made to appreciate nature and things around them. The natural environment is brought to them in the class room in form of videos clips where they see and hear animals both wild and domestic makes sounds and walk in their natural habitat. Through the Montessori laboratory, children can have an understanding of how a lake, river, mountain, ocean or valley looks like. This fosters children aesthetic ability and this is transferred from one level of learning to another. The learning corners at various learning centres also improve children's creativity as they appreciate the works of art displayed at the creativity learning corner in the classroom.

Fostering cooperation between parents and caregivers: the early childhood education brings together parents and educators of their children- caregivers. This converge brings the both parties to a central table to discuss on how to deliver quality educational programme to wards and ensure good returns in form of positive academic performance. Parents and teachers cooperate to assist children in the best ways. Observations as to what hampers children's development in the home and from the centre are discussed and ways of overcoming them stated also.

Affective development of children: children as they mingle with peers and caregivers and allow watching certain educational video clips develop emotionally. Children develop acceptability attitudes and interest within the cultural settings in the learning centres and at home. Certain values acceptable in the society are inculcated in children. Also ways of expressing affections are also reiterated. Children acquire all these through the provisions of early childhood education. Affective skills such as attitudes, feelings, interest, expression of joy and happiness are inculcated in children. These among others serve the significance of early childhood education.

Challenges of Childhood Education in the 21st century.

Though problems persist longer, not until they are solved, they still exist as a challenge to the society, education system and the entire well-being of the people in such an area. The following still

remain challenges plaguing childhood education in the 21st century hence solutions have not being proffered yet. These include but not limited to:

- **Inadequate Funding:** this is a basic challenge of curriculum innovation in the early childhood education programmes. Without funding of the curriculum process, the objectives of education will not be attained in the classroom. Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016) have it that funding is strategic towards the achievement of any educational system, especially those meant for the beginners. In same view Nwadiani (2012) opined that underfunding causes deteriorations in the educational system the world over. The achievement of childhood education programme especially in the public sphere lies on the funding available. It is sad news that public schools and centres designated to practice the novel childhood education is neglected in terms of finance. The educational system from record is not given due attention like other countries of the world. Internationally, the benchmark for educational budget in the national budget is 26% (UNESCO; 2006) but what is real in Nigeria is the direct opposite. Even if one may not meet up with international benchmark, at least priority must be given when it comes to the funding of education. From records, the budget of education has been fluctuating over the years.

The Table below shows Nigeria’s budget and allocation to the education sector from 2011 – 2018. This represents the argument in data form for clarity.

Year	budget (N)	Education allocation	% of total budget
2011	4972,000,000,000	306,003,000,000	6.155
2012	4877,000,000,000	400,015,000,000	8.202
2013	4,987,000,000,000	426,053,000,000	8.543
2014	4,962,000,000,000	493,000,000,000	9.936
2015	5,068,000,000,000	392,002,000,000	7.735
2016	6,061,000,000,000	396,006,000,000	6.534
2017	7,444,000,000,000	550,000,000,000	7.389
2018	8,612,000,000,000	605,008,000,000	7.025

Source: Central Bank of Nigeria Statistical Bulletin (2013), as cited in Onuma (2016).

From the above information, it is very clear that the educational system fluctuates in terms of funding. Instead of the 26% stipulated by UNESCO, the allocation of fund to the education system has not reached half of the global expectation and benchmark for the funding of education. This in turns affect the disbursement of fund to the childhood education. The inadequate disbursement of funds to the childhood programme has affected staffing, pupil-caregiver ratio which is supposed to be 1: 25 and 1:35 respectively. As a result, the classrooms are overcrowded which is not the ideal practice according to the national policy guidelines. In same vein, infrastructural facilities are affected also, having a grave effect on the overall success of basic education. Alabi and Ajayi in Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016) listed the benefit of funding to childhood programme when they opined that adequate funding of childhood education programme ensures the procurement of stimulating teaching aids, training and retraining of caregivers, enrichment and sensitization of the programme regular seminar, and workshops, other essentials practices in line with the policy on childhood education such as feeding and immunization, supervision and inspection, report writing, publications, school meals based on nutritional standards amongst others are key ingredient in ensuring that children are ready for the curriculum content. According to Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016) points to the fact that through adequate provision of these facilities, implementation of childhood programme is made possible.

Funding of childhood education makes available all facilities needed for the achievement of set objectives. For effective implementation of the curriculum, the facilities needed must be adequate to ensure teaching and learning effectiveness. The caregivers who are the sole implementers of the policy need to be motivated to do their jobs. Adequate funding will take care of these burning issues.

Non-involvement of caregivers in curriculum planning: None involvement of teachers in curriculum planning is one set back to curriculum innovation. Teachers are the ones, who would implement the curriculum at the classroom level, but they are always sidelined when planning for curriculum and when involved, one representative is chosen for an entire school or a local government. This cannot ensure adequate transfer of knowledge from the trained teacher to the less knowledgeable, hence the constant gap. The curriculum planned is actually imposed on teachers who had little or no input during the time curriculum was designed. This is totally unacceptable as it forms an act of undermining the competence of teachers in the teaching profession. To ensure adequate representation, all stakeholders must be informed about such development so as to contribute their wealth of knowledge which would be built into the document. The teacher as stakeholder in the educational milieu must be invited to give relevant contribution and take responsibility of all decision suggested by others which is to be documented as instructional content to be implemented in the classroom.

Inadequate Staffing: issues of inadequate human resource and personnel to implement the curriculum at the public childhood centres abound. According Owan and Odigwe (2019), the attendant and composite effects are poor quality teaching and poor performance of pupils at the internal and external examination. The government is yet to employ graduate who studied childhood education from colleges and faculties of education to implement the programme. The few persons found in the centres from observation are not graduates of early childhood education hence lack the competence and patience to see children develop properly without being offended at the excesses of children. It is however sad to state that the personnel who studied childhood education are yet to be recruited to man the preschool centres. What is seen in the preschool centres is that those who have been teaching primary school are the ones deploy to teach in early child care centres. It is an aberration. This confirms the assertion of Onuma (2016) who said that teachers and caregivers are in insufficient supply to schools.

Inefficient distribution of curriculum materials to public pre-schools centre: The government has all it takes as major stakeholder of education in the country to ensure the childhood education curriculum is provided and given priority. One of the basic role of the government as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (2014) is to develop and distribute curriculum materials to aid the implementation of childhood education. The reality on ground is that these curriculum materials have not been equally distributed to all government owned centres across Nigeria, thereby creating gaps in the utilization of these materials. Some Caregivers rely on self-developed curriculum or the foreign curriculum adopted by private schools which may not reflect the goals and aspirations of the NPE. Not only is the caregiver overloaded with responsibility but the primary school teacher who is saddled with children who have not fully transited from home to school. As stated by the National Policy on Education (2014) that the early childhood education deems it necessary to effect a smooth transition of preschoolers from home to school. The preschool centres have the onus of ensuring that the child is granted all the support needed to fit into the primary school level without much hitches.

Inadequate infrastructure: The facilities that should foster skills development of children in the preschool centres are insufficiently supplied to early childhood centres. Facilities that were provided by the Rivers State government under the leadership of His Excellency, Rt. Honourable Rotimi Amaechi are not poorly maintained. The merry-go-round and other physical facilities which enable children develop physical skills are not maintained. In-fact the building has been vandalized in some rural areas. In places where these abound, there is no way the curriculum content can be effectively implemented in the lives of pupils towards skills development as stipulated. In situation where there poor or dilapidated classrooms, children cannot develop skills which have been inbuilt into the curriculum. Onuma (2016) said that there are no sufficient basic facilities in schools.

Inefficient Supervision of Instructional Content: supervision is an activity done to checkmate the works or performance of teachers by an individual teacher in order to improve performance (Oke, 2016). Supervision is one of the strength of implementing programme in education. If the curriculum must be implemented and experienced in behavioral terms, close supervision must be ensured. However, supervision is a major challenge of early childhood education centres. Some supervisor stays at home and supervises with calls. This endangers the progress of childhood education.

Way Forward

Based on the afore-mentioned problems, the paper presented the following as way forward:

- Government should ensure that the budgetary allocation to education meets up with the UNESCO 20% benchmark of the national budget to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum of childhood level of education.
- Government should through it educational agencies recruitment of qualified teachers who majors in early childhood education to work in childhood centres. This will make for efficient implementation of the childhood curriculum. These caregivers already know the relevant methods, skills and materials that will be used in the schools. Having them in these classrooms will afford them great opportunity to inculcate predetermined skills in children.
- There should be proper dissemination of curriculum materials to public childhood centres by the ministry of education. There need to dispatch it to the various centres. This will make the caregivers use it as directed and reproduce these contents in children.
- Adequate provision of infrastructural facilities is necessary to the implementation of the early childhood curriculum. It is worthy of note that, the early childhood curriculum not only stipulate the learning experience but also give directives on how this experiences would be presented to children. Thus, the facilities to ensure this is not in adequate measure in ECE and the ones supplied before now are in bad shapes. Government and especially the Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB) should provide relevant necessary facilities that will aid the use of the curriculum in early childhood centres.
- There should be close supervision of caregivers as regards lesson delivery to ensure that it is in line with designed the curriculum. Caregivers should not be allowed to do as they please, in course of supervision, the needed skills and development needed in children should be monitored and ensured that they occur as expected. When there is adequate supervision, caregivers would be guided properly against noted challenges and boost their productivity.
- Caregivers should be invited to be involved in the curriculum planning process so that they can air their view on how the children's curriculum should be.

CONCLUSION

The early childhood education stage is a basic stage that can make or mar the entire life of an individual. However, the curriculum developed to guide and directs the pedagogical process for the development of skills in children are hampered by some challenges. These challenges include but not limited to non-involvement of teachers/ caregivers in curriculum planning/policy and decision making, inadequate infrastructural facilities, inexperienced/qualified teachers in the childhood centres. Ways to ameliorate the challenges were also outlined which are; recruitment of qualified caregivers who have degrees in childhood education, provision of infrastructural facilities to ensure the application of curriculum contents, proper dissemination of curriculum materials to schools amongst others.

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