



## Challenges and Sustainability of Early Childhood Care and Education Programs in Northern Nigeria: The Way Forward

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### ABSTRACT

*There is no dispute in saying that, education is an essential tool for achieving sustainable development in any nation, and the fact that children's capacity to contribute to such development can be best be obtained through education has raised an increase in ECCE programs around the world amongst international organizations and within national context as well as government at different levels. In northern Nigeria, ECCE programs is changing positively. Currently, the programs are now geared towards expansion, inclusion and redefining. This paper examined the extent of ECCE programs' contributions to sustainable development through increased in government participation, NGO's, development partners such as United Nations Children Emergency Funds (UNICEF), Child Development Partners (CDP). Parents' responses and awareness in the education of the younger children. Unfortunately, the programs are facing some challenges such as inadequate trained ECCE teachers/care givers, failure of the program to reach the most disadvantaged children to mention but a few. However, there is the need to develop an alternate approach to reach the most disadvantaged children, the government should as well expand its national ECCE policy and ensure its implementation.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, education has been accepted globally as the most effective means for a nation's quest to sustainable development. Again, having realized the importance of the first years of every human beings in the development of attitudes and values children's capacity to contribute to the national development cannot be over emphasized, according to UNESCO (2008), the first years of every human being's life are the most favorable one's for developing the attitudes and values that form the basis of their personalities. This is due to the fact that, the structure of values and attitudes built in the early years are the strong and permanent roots for one's entire life. For instance, if a nation desires that adults in the future generation should appreciate nature and all that is related to living in a healthy environment, than it is important to include it in the

early childhood education curriculum, at this stage of life everything practiced and deeply rooted in the minds of children remains forever in their lives.

The field of early education has received increased attention in recent years as a result of certain factors such as urbanization, changing economic situation, migration and adjustments to family structure, these new situations have resulted in greater acknowledge of formal early childhood care and education as a feasible option to home based care giving, in addition, the universal, provision of formal childhood services has also been promoted via international organizations who viewed the early years as formative in terms of later development and learning 'UNESCO (1990).

In the Northern Nigeria, this form of education keeps up changing as in the case of other parts of the country. Currently, the program

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is now geared towards expansion, inclusiveness, redefinition, early numeracy and literacy, increased government participation, NGO, development partners, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, CDP (Child Development Partners). Parents' responses, awareness and participation are equally important in making the program to succeed. Many children, especially girls in the northern part of the country, do not have access to ECE and primary school.

The main reasons are economic, the direct and opportunity costs of schooling and socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs are about gender roles which keep more girls at home looking after children, fetching water and other households' chores. Again, the government's concern on Education for All (EFA) is mainly focused on access to primary education only, leaving ECE to NGOS and private sector, thereby neglecting the first goal of EFA which states; "expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children". Another problem is that, the existing preschools models run by private organizations and individuals are too expensive which makes it inaccessible to majority of the people.

### **The concept of early childhood education**

Early childhood education is a relatively new discipline combining elements from several fields including infant stimulation health and nutrition, community development women's development, psychology, sociology, child development, and economics among others. (Evans et al 2000). while Lenira (2008) opines ECE as; (a) a space for meeting friends, enlarging experiences, improving knowledge and carrying out their projects, (c) an important support system for fathers and mothers who are working (e) an important mechanism to faster social and gender equality. Worth nothing is the fact that international attention to ECE arose from the recognition that health, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical development of culture all interact and are inter-related in a young child's life. Another definition that supports young children

and helps them to strike for future development is stated thus;

Early Childhood Education includes all the supports necessary for every child to realize his/her right to survival, to protection, and to care that will ensure optimal development from birth to age eight. The first years of a child's life are a crucial development period, and children who are matured and stimulated during these years are much more prepared for formal reading and math's and is more likely to have social skills they will need when it is time for kindergarten. Although parents are the child's first teachers, yet early childhood education programs are also important, especially with the growing number of families with one parent, and families where both parents work full time.

Thus, ECE is not only about preschools and ECE centres, it also includes parent's education and involvement links to health and nutrition services for children; activities for children aged 0-8 years; and other activities which either directly or indirectly affect the life experience of young children such as economic opportunity, adult literacy programs community and national ECE awareness raising campaigns, etc. Again, with rapid development in science and technology, the country needs skilled and productive workforce, at this juncture, quality education at early years i.e pre-primary and primary education, or even beyond can foster valuable skills, strengthen workforce and grow the nation's economy to high level.

### **Curriculum Contents of ECE**

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to the period from birth to eight years. The objective of ECCE is to nurture the children for their physical and mental development and to prepare them for schooling with right attitudes and habits (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment-NCCA, 2007). Young children learn quickly and are often filled with curiosity about the word around them. Schools and daycare centers that work with the youngest of children have such a unique opportunity to guide pupils and families toward a lifetime filled with love for learning. Curriculum is



an important part of this process. Curriculum is everything that students learn. It can be implicit or explicit, planned for or spontaneous. Children learn so many things through play. When two four-years-olds work together to set up a dollhouse, they are learning language about family, relationships, and furniture.

They are learning different perspectives about how to organized things, planting the seeds for critical thinking, or knowing how to think from multiple perspectives. The learning that happens through play cannot be replaced by any other learning, as it is self-directed, creative, and authentic (NCCA, 2017). A teacher's role during children's play is to watch and provide language to help children describe what they are experiencing. Teachers also provide rich settings with ample opportunities for different kinds of play. They observe and notice what kinds of play their students gravitate towards, and they work on ways to enrich and diversify these inclinations.

Young children approach learning in different ways, each bringing a unique set of attitudes, habits, and preferences to their interactions and explorations. Approaches to learning are the foundation that affects how children learn in every other content area. It encompasses children's engagement, motivation, and participation in the classroom. By understanding how to support this area of early development, adults can foster children's creativity, curiosity, confidence, independence, initiative, and persistence as they carry out their intentions, solve problems, and engage in a variety of learning experiences (Weiner, 2016).

Many of the abilities in this content area have been described as "executive functions," which are increasingly organized in state and national standards as crucial to children's development. Executive functions include being able to break down a task into its components, organize a plan of work follow through on it, and reflect on the success of one's efforts. All the component of the curriculum – the daily routine, the arrangement of the learning environment, and its adult-child interaction strategies – work together to encourage the abilities on approaches the learning.

Another area of the early childhood care and development education (ECCE) curriculum is the social development. This approach gives adults the tools they need to help children develop strong and positive relationships with adults and peers. Teachers learn how to create a positive climate in the classroom as a foundation for social learning. The social skills children develop contribute to their readiness for school and their ability to meet a variety of challenges throughout their lives. Creating a warm and nurturing environment in the early childhood care and development not only helps children form trusting relationships with others but also promotes learning in all areas. Surrounded by a positive and supportive classroom climate, children are likely to become engaged and motivated learners. Within this environment, activities and interactions are planned around the key developmental indicators (KDIs) in social and emotional development listed below (Wener, 2016).

1. Self-identity. Children have a positive self-identity;
2. Sense of competence. Children feel they are competent;
3. Emotions. Children recognize, label, and regulate their feelings;
4. Empathy. Children demonstrate empathy toward others;
5. Community. Children participate in the community of the classroom;
6. Building relationships. Children build relationships with other children and adults;
7. Cooperative play. Children engaging in cooperative play;
8. Moral development. Children develop an internal sense of right and wrong; and
9. Conflict resolution. Children resolve social conflicts.

The ECCE curriculum also promotes movement abilities, fitness, and healthy behaviour where children are physically active, as such, the teachers use children's physical actions as a gateway to learning in all areas of the curriculum. This helps educators develop effective, engaging,

teaching strategies and learning activities that promote the sequences of physical development that are essential for this age group. Learning personal care skills and acquiring habits that foster lifelong health are another important part of this curriculum area. The physical development and health content of ECCE curriculum according to Weiner (2016) include:

- a. Gross-motor skills: Children demonstrate strength, flexibility, balance, and timing in using their large muscles.
- b. Body awareness: Children know about their bodies and how to navigate them in space;
- c. Personal care: Children carry out personal care routine on their own; and
- d. Healthy behaviour: Children engage in healthy practices.

The ECCE curriculum also shows the powerful connection between language and literacy. The ECCE curriculum focuses on this connection by providing meaningful language and literacy experiences for children during every part of the daily routine. Since speaking, listening, reading, and writing develop together, all these activities are promoted in early childhood programmes. During the past three decades, researchers have learned a great deal about how language and literacy develop in young children. Based on these findings ten key developmental indicators (KDIs) in language, literacy, and communication has been identified.

These developmental milestones according to Weiner (2016), are the basis for planning literacy-related experiences in ECCE classrooms.

1. Comprehension: Children understand language;
2. Speaking: Children express themselves using language;
3. Vocabulary: Children understand and use a variety of words and phrases;
4. Phonological awareness: Children identify distinct sounds in spoken language;

5. Alphabetic knowledge: Children identify letter name and their sounds;
6. Reading: Children read for pleasure and information;
7. Concepts about print: Children demonstrate knowledge about environmental print;
8. Book knowledge: Children demonstrate knowledge about books;
9. Writing: Children write for many different purposes; and
10. English language learning: (If applicable) Children use English and their home language(s) (including sign language).

### ECE for Sustainable Development

The 1987 Brundtland Report (Our Common Future) states that; Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In another definition, the concept of sustainable development is referred to as the economic, political, social, environmental, cultural and institutional aspects of development based on new ethics where equity and human rights are at core of the process, to be more precise, this definition is showing that, a nation in search of sustainable development cannot cause irreversible damage to natural capital in the long term in return for short term benefits. The World Conservation Union (WCU) defined sustainable development as improving the quality of human life, while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems which emphasized improving the quality of human life while protecting the earth's capacity for regeneration.

ECE is a lifelong learning, from childhood to adulthood. Building a sustainable society requires people with a capacity for sustainable development, which is also the capacity for lifelong learning and development. The aim of children's learning for sustainable development are to cultivate children's awareness, knowledge, values, behaviors and habits related to sustainable development and to promote their ability to transform the ideal

sustainable development into reality. Likewise young children's learning for sustainable development should be embedded in their daily life, and that, play should also be integrated with their whole curriculum, not be separated from their real life. Questions and homemade toys etc. could be adopted as appropriate and effective approaches to young children's learning for sustainable development.

### Policy Guidelines for the Implementation of ECE in Nigeria

The demand for nursery education as it is popularly called was very low in northern Nigeria, until recently when parents, especially mothers begin to work in both public and private sectors. Consequent upon which the government realized the need for such form of education and therefore issued out an official recognition in its national policy on education with operational objectives is contained in the National Policy of Education (20120) as follows;

1. Effecting a smooth transmission from the home to the school;
2. Preparing the child for the primary level of education;
3. Providing adequate care and supervision for children while their parents are at work;
4. Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and environment, art, music, and playing with toys;
5. Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;
6. Inculcating social norms;
7. Learn good habits, especially good health habits and
8. Teaching rudiments of numbers, letters, colors, shapes, forms etc through play.

The guidelines for the government achievement of the stated objectives which are as follows:

1. To establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and exercise range both community and private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.

2. To make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood pre-primary education.
3. To ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of immediate community; and to this end will; (i) develop the orthography of many more Nigerian language and (ii) Produce text books in Nigerian languages.

The official recognition of ECCE program by the Federal Government in its policy document has made it possible for the establishment of pre-primary education in Nigeria which has brought the program to a lime light, that it is no longer a backyard issues (Obiweluzor, 2015).

### Challenges of ECE Programs

One of the major problems confronting the full implementation of ECE program in Nigeria, particularly the northern part of the country is lack full support from parents and the local community and this has to do with the economic status of the family. Many parents prepare sending their children especially girls for hawking to augment family income, while the boys are either send to the farms or to work as laborer.

### Other Challenges are:

1. Lack of government's commitment on ECE programs, instead it focuses its attention on access to primary education only. Leaving ECE to NGOs and private sectors.
2. Effects of ECE are recognized only in the medium and long term.
3. Children are still regarded as citizens of secondary importance.
4. Lack of enough qualifies care givers to handle the program with professionalism, and few universities are offering course in ECE.
5. Lack of unified curriculum, in order to standardized the program and call for review.



6. Teacher / Pupils ration is to high to achieve a qualitative education, most of the government ECE classes attached to public primary schools are overcrowded.
7. Some of the established private schools' buildings are far from ideal as some of them are situated in dwelling houses or large halls, and some face – to – face type of rooms is used as class rooms. Also, little consideration was given to site selection, accessibility, freedom from health and noise hazards and physical safety. In some case classrooms are even led directly to the main road or to wide gutters, (Heinge, 2016).
8. Lack of adequate funding of the program by government and NGO.

#### Way forward

The following suggestions are offered by the write as a way forward:

1. There is the need for the federal, state and local governments, to ensure the provision of necessary educational facilities in both rural and urban areas.
2. There should be effective monitoring supervision and inspection of these pre-primary schools by various departments in the ministries of education, which should be made mandatory.
3. The federal and state governments should liase with colleges of education and other tertiary institutions in the production of adequate qualified teachers in the field of ECE.

A model of approach should be developed which promotes sustainable development through appreciation of diverse and traditional understanding. Pre-schools can work with community to support health, nutritional and educational development. In corporation of community folklore, practice and resources in these programs can bring about positive

educational outcomes and also increased community pride.

#### CONCLUSION

By conclusion, it is necessary to say that quality education at early years enhances cognitive and social skills which are all associated with higher levels of success therefore, all stakeholder's attention should be focus on the potential role of ECE program in forming citizens for a sustainable societal development, because if the creation of a sustainable society requires a change of "mind and heart", nothing would be more suitable than starting with early years.

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