

QUALITY CONTROL IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *The growing demand and practice of early childhood education (ECE) within the Nigerian educational system have recourse for quality control and standardisation. This position has become necessary because of the proliferation of operators with the economic opportunity intentions. It is therefore a proposition that quality control in early childhood education should be ascertained in Nigeria within the policy framework. The prevailing situation of early childhood education in Nigeria and the prospects inherent for national development should be repositioned using strategic options that would ensure quality control. A mix strategy from the inputs of government, ECE operators, parents and critical stakeholders can be adopted to ascertain quality control in early childhood education.*

KEYWORDS: Quality Control, Early Childhood Education, Policy Framework, Strategic Options, National Development

INTRODUCTION

The sudden awakening of the global community on the stance of qualitative early childhood education is quite phenomenal; while the attention given to this fundamental phase of human development is unprecedented. Every stratum of the society seems to have realized that negligence and indifference to this stage of learning can spell doom on the education sector and the nation's future. The early childhood period is pretty delicate and pivotal to the rest of human existence on earth. The quality of life, as well as the contributions a child makes to the society as an adult can be traced back to the first few years of his/her life (Osanyin, 2002).

The evolution of early childhood education in Nigeria is traceable to the primitive societies where the onus lies on the families and communities to train a child, while the mother is the first teacher. The institutionalisation of this stage of child's development was far from imagination as communities had responsibilities and arrangements for educating their young ones as conscientious members of the societies.

Over the years, considering the phenomenal growth rate in childbirth and the increasing population of the Nigerian children; the proliferation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) operators to offer the in-loco-parentis service became a reality. The situation got worsened by the emergent change in the family roles as mothers (the first-ordained ECE operator) relatively abandoned their divine call in the quest to "win bread" for the family. The Machiavellian hunt for profit among others by most of these ECE (Business) operators and deviation from the policy direction became a heart-burden to various stakeholders. Hence, the standardisation and quality control of early childhood education in Nigeria becomes eminent and this is the thrust of this paper. It is in this context that this paper focuses on the review of:

I. Concept of early childhood education and quality

- II. The policy framework for early childhood education
- III. Benchmark for early childhood education quality control
- IV. The prevailing situation of early childhood education in Nigeria
- V. Prospects of Early Childhood Education to National Development
- VI. Strategic options for ensuring quality control in early childhood education

Concept of early childhood education and quality

Early childhood education is a type of education provided for children 0-3 years in Day Care Centres and for children 3years to less than 6 years in Nursery schools (Uzodinma & Akinware, 2001). It is a community-based, low-cost project for the holistic development of the child from 0-6 years. National Association for the Education of Young Children-NAEYC (1991) defines ECE as the education of young children from birth through age eight. It is a comprehensive approach to policies and programmes for children from birth to eight years of age. The purpose of Early Child Education is to protect the child's rights to develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potentials. It could be at home, a day-care centre, play group/crèche, nursery, kindergarten and lower primary. Osanyin (2012) highlighted other terms often used interchangeably with Early Childhood Education (ECE) which include: Early Childhood Learning (ECL), Early Childhood Care (ECC), Early Childhood Development (ECD), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Early Child Care Development and Education (ECCDE) and Early Care (EC).

According to Wall, Litjens and Taguma (2015), Quality is the most significant factor underlying the degree and the persistence of the impact of early childhood education. It was noted that international studies have differing perspectives on what constitutes quality, but some common components can be found (OECD, 2012). Structural quality refers to aspects such as class size, teacher-child ratio, formal staff qualification levels and size of the setting (Anders, 2015), while process quality focuses on the processes in early childhood education settings. A salient factor affecting process quality is context, and in particular, the interactions a young child experiences with his/her direct environment (Litjens and Taguma, 2010 cited in Wall, Litjens and Taguma, 2015), as well as with space and materials (Anders, 2015). Quality is a relatively value-based concept that is wholly constructed and subjective. Hence, there is no single model of early childhood education that is effective in all settings. However, there is a general acceptance that programmes that benefit young children must be of quality that is embedded within their families' cultures and values. (Olaleye, Florence & Omotayo, 2009)

The policy framework for early childhood education

Osanyin (2012) opined that the international consensus today is that no nation can be said to take Education for All (EFA) seriously if it does not place the required emphasis on comprehensive early childhood care and education. The sixth EFA goal in the document tagged *World Declaration For All And Framework For Action To Meet The Basic Learning Needs* articulates the need for expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and the disadvantaged children. Ultimately, the goals of early childhood education revolve around emotional safety, social competences, personal competences and the transfer of norms and values.

The Federal Government of Nigeria recognizes the importance of education in the economic development and social transformation process; hence she has given priority to early childhood education by inculcating its purpose as stipulated in the National Policy of Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, (2013) as follows: (i) to effect a smooth transition from the home to the school; (ii) to prepare the child for the primary level of education; (iii) to provide adequate care and supervision of the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, and so on); (iv) to inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys; (v) to inculcate social norms, develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit, learn good habits, especially health habits, and teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc.

The government has deliberately attempted to raise the quality of education at all levels in order to make the products of the Nigerian educational system more useful to the society. Therefore, early childhood education will provide that vital physical, psychomotor, affective, cognitive, social potentials which are fundamental to human life that will play very essential roles in the academic performance of children in the primary educational level and even more in the later life of the individual child (Osakwe, 2009).

Benchmark for early childhood education quality control

In addition to the dictates of the Education for All (EFA) document as reported by Osanyin (2012) and National policy on Education (2013); the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, Bangkok, Thailand (2004) reported an 18-points universally acceptable standard (with indicators) which covers: Standards of Child Quality, Standards of Educational Provision, Standards of Educational Administration and Management, Standards of Learning Community Development. Thus, the following tend to project a benchmark for quality control of early childhood education.

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| Standard 1: | Children should have virtues, morality and desirable values. |
| Standard 2: | Children should be conscious of environmental preservation and development. |
| Standard 3: | Children should be able to complete their jobs and work with others, and have a good attitude toward honest occupations. |
| Standard 4: | Children should be able to form concepts, solve problems, and think creatively. |
| Standard 5: | Children should have basic knowledge and skills. |
| Standard 6: | Children should have a learning enthusiasm, love of reading and self-development. |
| Standard 7: | Children should have healthy habits, and good physical and mental health. |
| Standard 8: | Children should have a sense of aesthetics and dispositions for arts, music and sport. |
| Standard 9: | Teachers should have virtues, morality, degrees/knowledge and competence relevant |

to their responsibilities; maintain steady self-development; and be able to get along with communities. A sufficient number of teachers should be available.

Standard 10: Teachers should have an ability to manage effective teaching-learning, especially child-centred instruction.

Standard 11: Administrators should have virtues, morality, leadership and competence in educational administration and management.

Standard 12: Educational institutions should have organizational and structural arrangement, administrative systems and organizational development that are holistic and systematic.

Standard 13: Educational institutions should have educational administration and management with school-based indicators.

Standard 14: Educational institutions should have learner oriented curricular arrangements and learning process.

Standard 15: Educational institutions should have diverse activities to promote children's qualities.

Standard 16: Educational institutions should have environmental arrangements and services that promote children to naturally develop to their full potentiality.

Standard 17: Educational institutions should provide support and use local learning resources and wisdom.

Standard 18: Educational institutions should cooperate with families, religious organizations, academic institutions and public and private organizations to develop learning paths in communities.

The prevailing situation of early childhood education in Nigeria

Operationally, it is quite obvious that there seems to be non-compliance of the ECE operators in Nigeria with the foregoing quality control benchmark. For instance, most teachers do not have abilities to manage effective teaching-learning, especially child-centred instruction; Educational institutions tends not to have environmental arrangements and services that promote children to naturally develop to their full potentiality; they seems not to provide support and use of local learning resources and wisdom; while cooperation with families, religious organizations, academic institutions, public and private organizations to develop learning paths in communities seems alien to the ECE institutions in Nigeria as stipulated by standard 10, 16, 17 & 18 among others. It is expected that operators should be the drivers and implementers of the policy framework but apparently far from the reality (Ejieh, 2006).

Gross deviation from the focal parts of the policy documents has been prevalent to the early childhood education system in Nigeria. Ejieh (2006) asserted that there are bound to be some shortcomings in the implementation of the policy on ECE and problems in the realization of the objectives of such a policy in a situation where virtually all provisions for early childhood or pre-primary education are made by private individuals and groups for mainly commercial purposes. Much of the shortcoming hinges on the failure of the Federal Government to put

into effect most of the measures it stated in the National Policy on Education aimed at ensuring that the policy objectives are achieved.

Poor ECE facilities are quite evident as nursery schools are located in various places and buildings, campuses of some universities and colleges, premises of some industrial and business organizations, 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 set 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.

Low quality, quantity of teachers and trained caregivers has become a norm. With the possible exception of the few nursery schools established by some universities, colleges of education, companies and a few rich individuals, teacher quality is generally low. It is only a few of the nursery schools especially those owned by educational institutions, private companies and wealthy individuals that can afford to engage the services of university graduate teachers and the holders of Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE) qualifications. Most others employ a few N.C.E. teachers (if any at all), who are usually underpaid, while others employ mainly Grade II teachers and secondary school leavers with the School Certificate or General Certificate (Ordinary Level) qualification (Ejieh, 2006). The nursery schools that engage the services of qualified teachers, especially those owned by private individuals usually charge high fees while those that charge relatively low fees usually employ unqualified teachers.

Employing unqualified teachers who receive low pay is a strategy used by many proprietors to make their services affordable to a great majority of parents and at the same time maintain a satisfactory profit margin. Teachers are usually linked to issues related to teaching-learning goals, learning achievement, organization of programmes, and the performance of the educational system which involves an analysis of the role of teachers, their behaviours, performance, remuneration, incentives, skills and how they are used by the system (Onu, Obiozor & Agbo, 2010).

Furthermore, significant provision is yet to be made in any public or private teacher training institution in the country for the increase in production of specialist teachers in early childhood education. Even for the institutions that run the programme for producing such teachers, it is doubtful if it can attract many clients, as neither the Federal nor any State government has established any nursery or pre-primary schools where graduates of such a programme can be employed. Work in private nursery or pre-primary institutions would probably have no attraction for specialist pre-primary teachers because of low wages and job insecurity associated with teaching in such institutions. Moja (2000) citing UNESCO (1996) reported that teachers have become marginalized and the profession is the most impoverished of all sectors of labour in Nigeria. He asserted that in almost every area of the system, the conditions of work environment, access to information, resources needed for supplies and equipment, salaries and benefits are extremely poor.

Lack of proper supervision of ECE operators: Ejieh (2006) reported that most of these problems hinge on the inability of both the State and Federal governments to exercise effective control on the establishment and running of pre-primary schools in the country. In fact, the number of registered pre-primary schools in some States is so large that even if the supervisors or inspectors of education are very enthusiastic to play their roles in this regard,

they will be overwhelmed by the amount of work involved. Lack of adequate number of inspectors to regulate the establishment of, and to monitor the activities in these nursery schools, the locations of some of which are not known to inspectors, is a real problem. Teachers' knowledge and skills are often outdated and the inspectors are not providing the necessary pedagogical support for further development (Moja, 2000).

Another related problem is the absence of uniform curriculum contents (learning experiences). Osakwe (2009) established that the *National Policy on Education* prescribes that the child in the pre-primary institution 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. In the absence of such guidelines and copies of the curriculum for pre-primary education, proprietors and teachers resort to curricular of their choice. Thus, a handful of the ECE providers operate Federal government curriculum as private proprietors had to provide their services in line with the values and priorities of parents in order to remain in business.

The curriculum of a typical nursery school owned by most private individuals includes alphabets, numbers, nursery rhymes, colouring and story time and, in some cases, rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. The emphasis of most is on the intellectual development of the children. Much more time is devoted to the learning of alphabets and memorization of facts, information, poems and some short passages from various books in English Language than to recreational and social activities. Emphasis is laid on children's intellectual development. This is because the yardstick for assessing the quality or effectiveness of nursery schools by parents seems to be the age at which the children attending them are able to count, recognize the alphabet, read and, in particular, recite memorized information, poems, verses and passages. The younger the age at which children attending a particular school can do these, the higher the quality of the school is adjudged to be by members of the public, and the more patronage it is likely to receive from parents if the fees charged are not excessive (Osakwe, 2009).

Uninterestingly, no government (Federal or State) in the country has done anything to ensure that mother-tongue or local language is mainly used for instruction in nursery schools as stipulated in the *National Policy on Education*. Enforcing the use of mother tongue in the schools will even run counter to the interests of parents of the children in such schools most of who are anxious for their children to acquire the official language (which is English) as early as possible.

Ejeh (2006) affirmed that, as far as the use of the mother tongue for instruction is concerned, the values of parents seem to be in conflict with those of the policy makers who prescribed that the medium of instruction in such institutions and lower classes of primary schools should be principally the child's mother tongue or the language of the local community. Contrary to this, almost all parents, especially of the middle and high classes that patronise pre-primary institutions, wish their children to be immersed in English language as early as possible because of the advantages that knowledge of the language conveys on such children in the primary and subsequent levels of the Nigerian educational system. The ease with which children acquire and speak English Language is one of most important criteria parents use to assess the quality of pre-primary institutions in the country. Osanyin (2012) opined that the practice of using foreign languages is simply "child abuse" because denying a child of the use of the mother tongue at the early stage of life is denying the child his/her identity. If such practice continues, Nigerian languages may go into extinction on Nigerian soil while our

children may have to travel abroad to learn them in future (Bamisiaye, 2011 cited in Osanyin, 2012). The early childhood operators in Nigeria therefore owe it to posterity to save our nation from the ongoing cultural annihilation, as this would be a great act of patriotism (Osanyin, 2012).

Moreover, the 1:6:3:3:4 system of education as stipulated in the national policy on education (2013), provides for a compulsory one-year pre-primary education which supposed to be a follow-up to the early childhood education in Nigeria. The One-Year Education given to children aged 5 prior to their entering primary school is expected to effect a smooth transition from the home to the school; prepare the child for the primary level of education; provide adequate care, supervision and security for the children while their parents are at work; inculcate social, moral norms and values; and inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, environment, art, music and the use of toys etc. through play could not record significant success because at age 5, most of the children are already at the primary school levels especially in private schools. The perversions and activities of some parents and private schools administrators make these objectives seem illusionary.

Furthermore, in pursuance of these objectives, Government is expected to set and monitor standard for pre-primary Education; develop and disseminate curriculum materials; policy, National minimum standards, curriculum, implementation guidelines and other materials that will enhance the implementation of the pre-primary education; fund the one-year pre-primary education; make conscious efforts on capacity building development of personnel at this level of education; embark on the sensitization of the community and the nation in general on the one-year pre-primary education, and ensure that relevant ministries, Department and Agencies, as well as the development partners synergize for proper implementation of the one-year pre-primary education due to its multi-sectoral nature. It is quite disheartening that these responsibilities of the government, ranging from funding to capacity building development of personnel as entrenched in the policy document are being reneged. This could be the ripple effect of the current economic recession in the country or sheer negligence of this critical sector of the nation.

Prospects of Early Childhood Education to National Development

Although, qualitative ECE is expensive; its importance to a child's early formative years is acknowledged worldwide and the ratio of early childhood educator to children has to be low to be able to provide proper care and learning experiences. Uppal, (2015) and Sinha, (2014) noted that in Canada, high-quality early childhood education and care costs are so high that many families are unable to afford it but it is important for the growth, development and the health of a child. It is more than a place for parents to leave their children when they go to work. Appropriate early experiences given to a child through quality care and educational provisions are essential to his/her development.

Qualitative Early Childhood Education provides a sure start for a child's development and capacity building. This capacity building is not only for the child's sake, it is also capacity building for the nation. High quality early childhood education is a wise investment to help children who are the future citizens. Quality really matters and needs to be built into any expansion of existing options.

Developing the skill base of workers in this field must become a part of government economic development strategy. This is consequential to the social and economic benefits accrued to the nation. There are short- and long-term economic benefits to taxpayers and the community if early education that meets high standards is available to all children, starting with those who are most disadvantaged. Indeed, universally available qualitative early education would benefit everyone and be the most cost-effective economic investment. High-quality early childhood education helps prepare young children to succeed in school and become better citizens; they earn more, pay more taxes, and commit fewer crimes. The early care and education industry is economically important, often much larger in terms of employees and revenues than other industries that receive considerable government attention and investment. Access to available and affordable choices of early childhood learning programmes help working parents fulfil their responsibilities. Qualitative early education is as essential for a productive 21st century workforce as roads or the internet; investing in it grows the economy (Calman & Tarr-Whelan, 2005).

Government investment in early education generates economic development for communities in the short run in the form of jobs, the purchase of goods and services, and a more efficient workforce. In the long run, quality early education builds an employable, educated workforce. Children who receive quality early education arrive at school ready to learn and they do better in school. They need fewer costly special education classes. They are more likely to graduate from high school with a changed orientation to create and hold jobs with higher salaries. They are less likely to be on government welfare scheme and significantly less likely to wind up as criminals in jails (Calman, & Tarr-Whelan, 2005).

Strategic options for ensuring quality control in early childhood education

The hope for a healthy, happy, friendly, peaceful and socially competent generation therefore lies in the place of the child in the society's scheme of activities and the provision of quality of human and material environment that surround the child in early years (Osayin, 2012). In other words, the quality of early childhood education should not be compromised, as every stakeholder in the Nigerian nation; especially in the education sector should arise to this call for the future not to be watched ruined at present. Thus, the following should be considered in an attempt to uphold this fundamental stage of the nation's education system.

There should be a review of the licensing and approval process. The inspectorate should also strengthen the assessment process and establish a National Quality Framework for early childhood education providers in Nigeria. This could ultimately lead to the award of a 'Quality in Early Childhood Education mark' (QECE), where providers reached predetermined quality standards. It should be envisaged that assessment associated with the QECE mark would take account of the developmental processes that ECE providers were engaged in. Inspectors should also assist providers to attain the QECE standards by identifying the areas where improvements are required and by suggesting approaches which providers could take to achieve the improvements.

Government should set up a council or commission comprising members of the ECE industry to upgrade, assure its quality and represent the industry. Early Childhood Association of Nigeria (ECAN) should be strengthened, recognised and upgraded to a professional institute chartered by an Act of Parliament. This would enable these bodies to create awareness through advocacy programmes and be involved in people development towards quality control and professionalism.

Urgent, mass and planned investment in human capacity development of ECE operators is germane since there is a strong consensus that the best early education is delivered by well-trained and well compensated teachers. This means focusing resources on the professional development and compensation of teachers and the design of developmentally appropriate curricula and materials. Every stakeholder should work for coherent, nation-wide systems that will support the training, education and compensation of a highly trained workforce, with incentives to move from certificate to bachelor's degree.

Corporate participation in ECE as corporate social responsibility should be encouraged. Organisations should be more innovative in handling their social responsibility and employees' welfare programmes in order to maximize the productivity and commitment of their workforce; especially the women folks. Employers should consider setting up ECE centres in their workplace, Establish ECE fund for their staff or provide land and space for operators to set up ECE centres. Also, public-private partnership arrangement should be promoted to establish ECE Training Centres with conference, teaching and researching facilities anchored around laboratory childcare centres and preschools.

Qualitative early childhood education must value and support the role of parents. Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years. The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows.

CONCLUSION

Early Childhood Education is in fact a start to life and a reliable foundation to continuing education. Learning begins at birth and at eight most 'brain wiring, language abilities, physical capabilities and cognitive foundations have been set in place. Ensuring qualitative Early Childhood Education (ECE) is investing in the whole child and dividends continue to pay off throughout the entire life cycle. One major compass to navigate the future and secure the emergence of a dependable generation that will not think the nation owes it something is to ascertain the quality of the whole educational system that our children are passing through now. Access to qualitative early childhood education should not be a privilege to the Nigerian child but a right as entrenched in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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