

WISE INVESTMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Development can neither be attainable nor sustainable without children. There are strong linkages between early education and sustainable development. A nation that desires economic growth and productivity must make education and care of the young ones issues of consideration. Children have enormous potentials for societal transformation and development but they can hardly assume this front seat without adequate preparations, good care and education as well as support from the society. There is a need to make deliberate and conscious effort to invest in our children's early years. Hence, this paper highlighted the importance of the early years and the need for early investment. It discussed the contribution of early childhood care and education to sustainable development and also described the qualities of early childhood care and education programme that can impact a nation's development and suggested ways to improve the Nigeria's early child care and education programmes.

Keywords: Wise investment, Early childhood education, Sustainable development

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation has very robust objectives clearly spell out in her National Policy on Education in which education is regarded as the powerful tool to achieving them. In consequence, education is expected to build a free, democratic, just and egalitarian society. Also, it is considered to have potential to build a united, strong and reliant nation. Likewise, its position in building a great and dynamic economy and a land full of bright and great opportunities for all citizens cannot be rivaled (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). In essence, great responsibility is fully accorded to education 'as instrument per excellence' for effecting national development.

To a great extent, education is seen as being responsible for the growth and development which man or society passes through in life. According to UNESCO (2007) education is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve sustainable development. Igbuzor (2006) affirmed this by concluding that education is the key index of development. The great premium placed on education is further wrapped up in a Chinese proverb quoted in UNESCO (2008) that:

*If you are thinking a year ahead, plant a seed.
If you are thinking a decade ahead, plant a tree.
If you are thinking a century ahead, educate the people.*

A sustainable development is that which meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This definition points us to the fact that educating for sustainability should begin very early in life. It is in the early childhood period that children develop their basic values, attitudes, skills, behaviours and habits, which may be long lasting.

Children occupy a significant place in the society and a nation that desires a sustainable development should see their early care and education as priorities. It is an obvious and irrefutable saying that development can neither be attainable nor sustainable without children because they are the assets and future of a society. Can a society progress without taking care of its assets? Soyibo (2005) asserted that the greatest assets that Nigeria has as a nation is not the oil deposits of the Niger Delta, neither is it mangrove or rain forest stretching from Lagos to Calabar but the children, where lies her greatest potential, strength and hope. The child is the pool on which the future generation is predicted. Thus, children must have the pride of place in every community. As the future hope and leaders of tomorrow, they have to be cared for and nurtured to develop their full potentials so that they can make positive contribution to the development of the society (Akwara, Soyibo and Agba, 2010).

The survival and development of any society depends upon the preservation, nurture and development of the child. In other words, for a society to move to a greater height in terms of development in all aspects, it must give quality attention; make a deliberate and early investment to the welfare as well as all-round development of her children. To neglect their care and deny them all they need for their physical, intellectual and social development early in life is to expose the future of Nigeria to a ruin. Osanyin (2002) submitted that children should be given a good quality of human and material environment in order to have a healthy, happy, friendly, peaceful and socially competent generation.

At early childhood education, foundation for a sound intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and physical development and lifelong learning should be laid. This is so crucial because it has an enormous potential in fostering values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that support sustainable development. The World Declaration on EFA at Jomtien (1990) introduced the idea that "learning begins at birth" affirming Early Childhood Education as an integral part of basic education and an educational level in its own right. Early Childhood Education is the first stage of education where the foundation for lifelong learning and development is laid. It covers the period 0 to 8 years. Proper care for children in the early years provides a strong foundation for growth, development and learning when they transit into primary school and beyond. Their survival is to a greater extent determined by the quality of care provided by care givers during those early stages of life. Therefore, investments in early childhood care and education is vital to the success and development of our nation.

Moreover, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is acknowledged worldwide as critical to the development of individuals and society as a whole. ECCE programmes can and do play a pivotal role in providing crucial learning experiences that enhance children's total development and thereby make the child a meaningful member of its society. A child's first years are a time of amazing physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic growth. This is the age when foundation for later years is laid so, children need high-quality personal care and learning experiences. Children's experiences in their first years have a profound impact on the course of the rest of their lives. When they are in responsive, nurturing, stimulating environments their learning potentials thrive greatly but when they are deprived of these opportunities it is detrimental to their later development.

Neurologists believe that a time when the human brain develops the fastest is between ages of 0 to 6 years old. It is considered the golden age of a child's development. They are supported by findings of analyses of longitudinal studies of the development of children which showed a high correlation between the performances of children on general ability tests at four or five years of age and at seventeen years of age (Hunt 1961, Bloom 1964). Bloom observed that in terms of mental development

50% takes place between 0—4 years

30% takes place between 4-8 years

20% takes place between 8-17 years

Educationalists and psychologists agree that it is within the first six years that the foundations of an individual's linguistic, cognitive, social, creative, physical, moral and spiritual development evolve. Deficits in these areas of development can have long term implications for the child

The economists conclude that investments in quality early education can produce a rate of return to society significantly higher than returns to most stock market investments or traditional economic development projects. Cognitive and social skills that are developed in the early stages of childhood become the foundations for lifelong learning, lacking which will result in significant costs for both individuals and the society in general. By increasing early abilities, preschool programmes increase both the prospective earnings potential from a given level of schooling and the net prospective benefits from additional schooling. Several studies especially in developed countries have confirmed the economic benefits of early childhood education as an economic investment. (Lawrence, J. S. (2004). Cahn, et al 2005). Studies like-the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centres (CPC).

The sociologists are of the view that children that pass through ECCE grow up to be self-confident and independent and they commit fewer crimes. Children who attend early childhood education programmes have the benefit of relating to other students, which can increase their social skills. Children who have experienced early childhood education are more socially competent in their preschool, kindergarten and school-age years. Parents and the children's peers also reported these children as "friendlier and more sociable.

Benefits of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The benefits of high-quality early childhood care and education are irrefutable. A vast body of research has demonstrated that ECCE programmes benefit children, families, and communities ranging from improved academic outcomes to the economic savings to schools and states. Leslie and Linda (2005) submitted that high quality ECCE for young children have a long-term, positive effect on children's well-being and academic success. For example, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project has found a total benefit/cost ratio of \$17.07 for each \$1 invested in 2000 dollars when the children in their study reached the age of 40 years. Children who participated in early child interventions under Jamaica's first Home Visiting Programme, Colombia's Cali project and the Turkey Early Enrichment Project scored higher, on average, on intellectual aptitude tests than did nonparticipants. Studies in the United States showed that the benefits of ECCE are higher for marginalized children. (Leslie and Linda, 2005)

The studies cited above identified benefits of early childhood care education in the following areas:

Higher intelligence scores

Research has shown that half of a person's intelligence potential is developed by age four and that early childhood interventions can have a lasting effect on intellectual capacity, personality, and social behaviour. Integrated programmes that target children in their very early years are therefore critical for their mental and psychosocial development.

Less repetition and Higher school completion rates

It reduces dropout and repetition rates. Children enter school and are able to succeed in school. Children who participated in an early childhood programme repeated fewer grades and made better progress through school than did non-participants in similar circumstances (UNICEF, 2007; Nakpodia, 2011). It increases more school completion and skills. They are more likely to complete schooling and have greater self-esteem.

Improves school achievements

Interventions in education programmes prepare children for school improve their performance and reduce the need for repetition. Early interventions are the most cost effective in that they minimize the need for special interventions, have the most significant effects on children's development and learning and have a decisive and lasting impact on how children grow to adulthood.

Encourages greater adult's productivity

It helps in making children become adult with better job' preparedness. It also gives ability to meet future labour force demands and it increases earning potential and economic self-sufficiency. ECCE programmes strengthen society as a whole by ensuring that its individual members live up to their full potentials. With ECCE, children are more likely to become productive members of society (UNICEF, 2004). It can also enable participants to earn more

and can raise their productivity in the workforce, contribute to human capital formation, raise participants' productivity and income levels, promotes higher levels of social and emotional functioning, - and become better citizens.

Improves social and emotional behavior

Young children who receive the right preparation during early childhood are equipped with the expertise needed to develop social and basic life skills. When a child's behaviour is regulated during the early years, it has a greater chance for not being anxious, impulsive and behaviourally disorganized when he/she reaches school (UNICEF, 2001).

Increases chances of avoiding the prison pipeline Those who are able to complete ECCE programmes lower criminal justice and prison costs. Fewer welfare payments early investment in children can reduce the need for public welfare expenditures later and cut down on the social and financial costs associated with grade repetition, juvenile delinquency, and drug use.

Improves nutrition and health

Early child development programmes enhance the efficacy of health care and nutrition initiatives by providing psychosocial stimulation. When children receive good care and nurturing appropriately, they grow and develop in healthy ways and experience fewer illnesses and diseases.

It generates higher economic returns and reduces social costs

Early childhood education produces higher individual incomes for participants, increased tax revenues, reduced school expenditures (due to reduced grade retention and special education), and reduced criminal justice expenditures. By increasing children's desire and ability to learn, investment in early child education can increase the return on investment in their later education by making that education more effective.

It encourages greater social equity

Integrated programmes for young children can modify the effects of socioeconomic and gender-related inequities, some of the most entrenched causes of poverty. Studies from diverse cultures show that girls enrolled in early childhood programmes are better prepared for school and frequently stay in school longer. Early childhood interventions also free older sisters from the task of tending preschoolers, so that they can return to school.

It increases the efficacy of other investments

Including early childhood interventions in larger programmes can enhance the programmes' efficacy. Early childhood interventions in health and nutrition programmes increase children's chances of survival. With more mothers working, safe child care has become a necessity. ECCE provides safe child care which allows women the chance to continue their education and learn new skills.

Current Issues in Nigerian Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE)

Despite all the efforts being taken to promote early childhood education in Nigeria, the sector is still faced with many challenges that make it to be far from fulfilling its roles as a tool in sustainable development (Maduewesi, 2001; Nakpodia, 2011; Obinaju, 2011). For example, Obinaju (2011) documented that the singular provision that welcomes the contributions of agencies, communities and private individuals in the establishment and management of early childhood schools resulted in a chain of variables plaguing this sector of education. They noted that these variables range from funding issues across quality to supervision and discipline issues. The authors identified the challenges listed below in Nigerian's ECCE.

Not adequately financed:

The financial input of the government at the three tiers of pre-primary level of education has been very negligent. This level of education is recognized by Government in the National Policy on Education but declares that its financing is the collective responsibility of all tiers of government but there is no financial provision for education before the primary school. (Maduewesi, 2001; NPE, 2004). Nakpodia (2011) quoting (Maduewesi, 2001) documented that the only time the government was visibly involved in the financing of education at this level was through the Early Child Care (ECC) project of the NERDC which was founded through a collaboration agreement between the UNICEF, the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (BVLFF) and the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Limited access to ECCE / Pre-Primary Education

Governments have for long neglected this level of education leaving it to private initiatives. The consequence of this is that ECCE becomes available only to those children whose parents can afford the services. This is completely in opposition to the Millennium Development Goals - to expand early childhood care and education, provide free and compulsory education of good quality by 2015 such that no child is denied the opportunity to complete a good quality education is not yet realizable.

Adequate supervision and quality not guaranteed

The Government's inability to regulate and control the establishment and operations of pre-primary led to the indiscriminate establishment of pre-primary institutions with little or no concern for standards of enforcing the educational laws which relate to them as provided in the NPE. The quality of many of these profit-oriented, unregistered and unapproved private schools cannot be guaranteed as they provide ineffective and poor education services. According to Obinaju (2012), many of them operate schools in substandard buildings, provide poor quality teachers, charge exorbitant fees and fall short in curriculum issues.

Poor learning environment

Learning environment is an indicator of a quality ECCE. Many of our early childhood schools in Nigeria are nothing to write home about in terms of quality. Some operate in substandard buildings with inadequate instructional support facilities. The safety and security of children cannot be guaranteed in some schools. Very many of the personnel in our childhood schools

are not warm, accommodating and responsive. All these factors could not encourage the development of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social skills of children which are of course detrimental to obtaining a functional education because environment in ECCE is many things.

Unfavourable working conditions

Majority of early childhood educators work under unpleasant working atmosphere and often have very low social and professional status. As noted by Obinaju (2012) teachers of this sector are paid so little that they look elsewhere for what to supplement in order to survive. The low status and unfavourable working conditions of early childhood educators are major obstacles for envisaging an increased and active role of early childhood education in sustainable development.

What kind of early childhood care and education programme would be preferred?

What kind of early childhood education should we practice if it were to be functional and contribute to sustainable development? UNESCO (2010) emphasized that quality really matters in the services and provision of early childhood care and education that is expected to bring enormous benefits and development to a nation. The studies of High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centres (CPC) also reveal that potential economic benefits depend on childhood programmes being of high quality. For Nigeria to meet the challenges of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to become one of the leading economies in the year 2020, special interests and investments must be made in the education of millions of children and such investment must be a quality one. Nakpodia (2011) stated that if the pre-primary education is the "recognized" foundation stone of Nigerian educational system, then it should be reinforced, adequately funded, equipped, staffed and wholeheartedly implemented and not neglected. Therefore, childhood care and education programmes provided in Nigeria should have the following:

Equal access

Early childhood care and education should be made accessible to all children seeing that it is where the foundation for development is laid and the first stage of education. An important prerequisite for a nation or society to be sustainable is to give every child equal access to quality early childhood care and education which all countries must make every effort towards. Every child has the right to adequate care, learning, development and protection, and a sustainable society is where everyone's rights are recognized, respected and fulfilled. Increasing *investment* in improving access, quality and equity of early childhood provision and supporting families is an urgent necessity.

Developmentally appropriate practice

The quality ECCE that will produce functional education should be one that is developmentally appropriate in policy and practice. The curriculum planning and teaching focus should be to achieve and enhance development and learning. The age, interests, needs and abilities of each child is taken into consideration and the education is relevant to the culture of the child (NAEYC, 2009; Moravcik, 2013)

Quality status of the early childhood education personnel

An ECCE that will be efficient for national development improves and expands teacher training, accreditation and the professional development of ECE professionals. FGN, NPE, 2004 states that 'No educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers'. Teachers are the main determinants of quality in education and as well the most important agents in the engineering of development in the society (Imogie, 1999). It puts in place human and material conditions required to achieve quality early childhood care and education, including committed, valued and trained professionals, as context sensitive curricula and materials. It empowers child educators and caregivers for effective and productive services. Adedigba and Ajala (2013) advocated that early childhood educators should be better prepared to produce a workforce that can compete with the global market. In essence, preparation of highly qualified teachers of Early Childhood Education is critical to the success of long term success of Nigeria.

An effective and quality learning environment

An appropriate ECCE environment is central to the provision of quality care and education in the early years for sustainable development. The early experiences must be stimulating and involve positive interactions with adults in appropriate learning environments. The safety and security of the environment should be guaranteed. Also, should be child friendly and loving environment in which the children can grow, learn and thrive. Good quality ECCE practices are dependent on infrastructural support; adequate government infrastructures play an important role in ensuring greater access (Penn, 2008). It also have a government policy that will provide guidelines on the operation of ECCE centres that ensure the suitability of the environment, licences, regular supervision of premises and the provision of an adequate budget for the enforcement of regulations (Awopegba, 2010).

Child as an active participant

In education for sustainable development, children are seen to be capable of making meaning in their own learning. So, young children's perspectives and meanings should be listened to and considered. This will shape the content and approaches of learning. As portrayed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – the child is a right holder, who is an active participant and has his or her contribution to make in society's present and future, and not an invisible, marginal worthless being. (UNESCO, 2008)

All round development

It should be broader than simply taking children outdoors to discover the beauty of nature and speaking about the natural environment. ECCE should be provided to take care of all aspect of a child's development- intellectual, social-emotional and physical.

Diversity

Learning to respect and appreciate diversity should begin early – through parents, community members, and early childhood programmes. Early education should help children acquire an identity firmly grounded in a culture closest to them, while developing a sense of themselves as world citizens.

Democratic Education

Democracy is one fundamental value embedded in sustainable development, and a requisite for a just society where everyone's participation in the social, cultural, economic and political life is valued and counted. Teaching of values and practices can and should start in the smallest unit of society – the family and should also be part and parcel of an early childhood education programme.

Adequate Financing

Early childhood interventions, like many other social programmes require adequate funding. There should be adequate funding for a quality ECCE. There is need for the nation - Nigeria to step up her funding and provision of ECCE. For example, in the United Kingdom, public investment in pre-school education rose nearly fourfold from £1.1 billion to roughly £5 billion in the decade 1997/8–2007/8 (Hopkin et al., 2010)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The child care and education in this country is critical to our economy. The economic growth and productivity of our country depend largely on the foundation laid during early years of our children who are our most precious resource. Investing 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 and to hold good jobs. They are significantly less likely to wind up in the courts and in the jails.. Failing to invest sufficiently in quality early care and education is like failing to secure one's future. It is short-sighted not to invest sufficient resources in early care and education since the return on investment in our young children's development can yield a high public return greater than many current economic development programmes. The fact remains that the future leadership and work force and national development of any society lie in the hands of children; but this fact can hardly become real without the adult population and state institutions promoting and ensuring the growth and development of children through wise and deliberate investment into early childhood and care education. Sustainable societies cannot be built if children are not given the opportunity to develop a strong foundation for development, wellbeing and lifelong learning.

1. Child care and early childhood education must be a priority by ensuring that ECE is high on the nation's agenda and part of its overall policy and strategy on education.
2. There should be provision of quality and affordable early childhood education for all children. Government should promote ECE that is publicly funded and universally accessible.
3. The parents, government and the society will thereafter benefit from an improved early care and education system, each should make a contribution to the effort. Therefore,

multiple funding streams, including public, private and philanthropic funding should be encouraged.

4. Government should increase support and funding for research on education for sustainable development and early childhood education.
5. There should be provision for continuous professional development for teachers and other professionals. Pre-service and in-service training of early childhood educators and caregivers must be provided regularly.
6. There should be strict and close monitoring and supervision of ECE establishments by the government.
7. Every individuals involved in providing services for children either as an employer (proprietors), employee (care-givers, teachers), parents and government officials-supervisors, policy makers should examine him/ herself what kind of investment he/she is making in the building of these nation's children.
8. There should be professionalization in Early Childhood Education in order to wield the untrained and people that do not have certificate in Early Childhood and Primary Education from this sector. At least Diploma in Early Childhood and Primary Education should be made the minimum requirement for any person that wants to establish a school or work in this field. This will prevent every Dick, Tom and Harry from coming into the sector.
9. Efforts should be made by all concerned with learning and development of young children to increase awareness at all levels and in all sectors of society about the importance of early childhood education as the foundation for active and responsible citizenship.

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