

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A COUNSELLOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Education is a dynamic instrument for change and it is considered to be a tool for overall change for sustainable development. The formal school setting in early childhood education is a supplement to the home. It promotes the complete development of the child that the home can easily provide. Children (especially of working parents) may be left in the care of untrained and unhealthy people in crowded apartment devoid of playing materials and playmates that children need. This may lead to neglect and deprivation which may result to lasting severe and negative effects in the life of the child. If however the formative years are characterized by exposure to a wide variety of learning activities and social contacts, skilled teaching, and intelligent guidance, then healthy growth and adjustment occurs. Early childhood education give children a group experience which extends values of family given them a total experience. This paper states the objectives of early childhood education, traces its historical background, expatiates on the government's efforts on early childhood education and examines the importance of early childhood education for sustainable development and gives a brief counsellor's perspective. Recommendations were further given to improve early childhood education for sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood, Education, Sustainable Development, Counsellor's Perspective

### Introduction

Education is a very important asset to the individual and to the society. It is said to be a process that is essential to the achievement of personal goals and aspirations (Ali, 2012). Education is a tool for overall change in economic and social development. Dioha and Baiti (2002) see education as a good thing essential to human well-being and is also a process by which society or nation moulds the individual by subjecting him/her to a selected and controlled environment for the purposes of his attaining social competence and optimum individual development.

Early childhood education is said to be the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering primary school (National Policy on Education 2004). Early childhood education as defined by Ahamfuna (2011) is the education meant for children between the ages of 3 to 6 years. Osakwe (2009) sees early childhood education as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3-5 years plus prior to their entering the primary school. That is to say that early education is a special kind of education provided in an institution for children, prior to their entering the primary school. Early childhood education, in the context of formal education can be said to be "a formalized educational process to which children between the ages of two and a half through five plus are subjected to in designated pre-school institutions" (Mezieobi 2006) Early childhood education experiences according to Barnard (2001) positively affect later home and school involvement in education. He further adds that a child who fails to acquire early education may suffer emotionally, socially, intellectually and even physically if he is pushed into the primary school

without a sustainable early childhood education experience that will give him a solid foundation in the primary school. Therefore for the effective and efficient unlocking and development of a child's latent abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour of positive values in the society in which he lives, early childhood education becomes very imminent. This is important because researches on early childhood education (Barnard, 2001; Mezieobi, 2006; Osakwe, 2009) have shown that early childhood education experiences have great impact on all areas of a child's development and had suggested that the first teacher is an extremely important person in the child's life.

### **Objectives/Aims of Early Childhood Education**

According to the National Policy on Education (2004) the objectives of early childhood education include the following

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

In addition to the above, Alhassan (2011) stated that the aims of early childhood education as

- The intellectual development of the child, that is encouraging his use of language, helping him to learn how to learn, stimulating his curiosity and encouraging the development of his ability to use concepts.
- The social and emotional development of the child. That is helping him to form stable relationship, encouraging his sense of responsibility, his consideration for others, his self confidence, his independence and his self control.
- The aesthetic development of the child. That is giving opportunity to experiment with variety of materials in arts and music encouraging him to be creative and expressive and awakening in him a growing awareness and appreciation of beauty.
- The physical development of the child. That is helping the child to use his body effectively by providing fresh air, space to play and sleep, good training in personal hygiene and regular medical attention.
- The creation of an effective transition from home to school. That is providing mutually supportive conditions for the child's development in both home and the school.

Bello (2006) stated that most early childhood education centres are private and they wide range of objectives not exactly based on the National Policy on Education. They state their objectives as □ Developing in the infants the right attitude to formal school.

- Including in infants the love, respect for the cultural norms and set of moral values.
- Fostering a healthy school- home and community relation.
- Developing in the infant the spirit of self-fulfilment and positive self-concept.
- Inculcating into the infants the zeal and motivation to do and to be good.

Looking at all the above objectives/aims of early childhood education one can say that early childhood education has an important role to play in sustainable development of the nation.

## Historical Development of Early Childhood Education

The home or the parents are expected to mold the child's behaviour, but the western societies felt that the family needed support to this task especially parents that are working. As a result of this the early childhood education was introduced in the west. It also felt that it is the best way to maintain the values of the society and its younger ones. It felt that a society can be judged by its attitude to its youngest children, not only in what is said about them but how this attitude is expressed in what is offered to them when they grow up (Alhassan, 2011). The absence of large number of parents from their homes during the day led to child neglect. This stimulated a number of charitable agencies to seek ways of caring for the children of working parents. Jean Baptiste Firmin Marbeau was said to be among the early leaders to start a early childhood care. He found the "crèche" in 1846 in France with the aim of fostering child care. Thereafter, pre-primary institutions were established in many parts of France and in several other European countries. A large number of nurseries were set up in factories, enabling mothers to take brief periods to attend to children.

In the United States of America, early childhood education is conceived as a tool which facilitates easy response to certain basic needs critical to the young child's full development. The first early childhood education centre was established in 1854 in the United States of America. Many more nursery schools were established in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them were established by charitable organizations. Early childhood education movement received great impetus during the World War 1 in both United States of America and Europe. In France, Britain and Germany, nurseries were established even in munitions plants under direct government sponsorship. The number of Nurseries rose in the U.S.A, but without government aid. However, during the years following World War 1, Federal, State and Local Governments in the U.S.A. began to exercise some control over early childhood education through licensing, inspection and regulation of conditions within the facilities (Bello, 2006).

In the United Kingdom, early childhood education is regarded as the philosophy that regards all children as active learners and individual who can demonstrate to their teachers their learning needs and wants. Early childhood education became popular after the World War 1 in United Kingdom.

In Nigeria early childhood education is being run under the same pattern or approach as that of the U.S.A in terms of control through licensing, inspection and regulations of conditions within the facilities. The National Policy on Education (2004) stated that it is the responsibility of the government for pre-primary education therefore; government shall establish pre-primary section in existing public schools and encourage both community/private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.

Early childhood education drew enormous inspiration from Piaget's theory of development making it theoretically conceived as based on play as a principal vehicle through which children learn to acquire knowledge.

## Government Efforts in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is meant to provide solid educational programmes that stimulate the development of skills in communication, a growing awareness of size, shapes and colour, manipulative skills and physical development. That is why the Federal Government of Nigeria in its National Policy on Education (2004) states that government shall –

- Establish pre-primary education in existing public school and encourage both community/private efforts in provision of pre-primary education.
- Make provisions in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education.
- Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community.
- Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages.

- Produce text books in Nigerian languages.
- Ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this, regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education.
- Set and monitor minimum standard for early child care centres in the country.
- Ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education

Looking at the above, one can say that the Government has deliberately attempted to raise the quality of education at all levels in order to make the products of our 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.

### **Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Development**

The concept of sustainable development means development that continues to meet today's needs in ways that will not jeopardize future generation. It is said to be the only way to guarantee humanity's well being now and in the future generation. The first step towards sustainable development is to encourage attempts to disseminate correct knowledge and promote divers approaches to problems and education is an important step towards the achievement of these objectives. Early childhood education being the backbone of the educational system of any society has an important role to play in achieving sustainable development.

Sustainable development is a pattern of resource that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that needs can be met not only in the present, but in indefinite future. It is also defined as a way in which developing nations undergoing the process of industrialization will avoid becoming like current industrialized nations with high level of emission. Education is one of the scopes of sustainable development (Bello & Mamman 2009).

The sustainable development of any country depends largely on the quality of education provided. Therefore quality education is a major contributor in overall progress towards sustainable development of any country, in which there is a great need for effective early childhood education so as to enhance quality education from the grassroots. Early childhood education experiences according to Barnard (2001) positively affect later home and school involvement in education. A child who fails to acquire early education may suffer emotionally, socially, intellectually and even physically if he is trusted into the primary school without a sustainable early childhood education experience that will give him a solid foundation in the primary school. Therefore for the effective and efficient unlocking and development of a child's latent abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour of positive values in the society in which he lives, early childhood education becomes very imminent. This is of utmost importance because researches on early childhood education have shown that early childhood education experiences have great impact on all areas of a child's development and had suggested that the first teacher is an extremely important person in the child's life.

Going by the above, it is obvious that the promotion of sustainable development lies beyond the environment of basic education, but rather early childhood education plays an important role in sustainable development since Psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Erik Ericson opinionated that early childhood experiences have a lot of implications on the later life of individuals. The rearing practices which the child is exposed to influences the values, norms, and belief of individuals even in later life. The contents of the knowledge which the child is exposed to early in life are bedrock to later education and life. There is a saying that says "train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

### **A Counsellor's Perspective:**

Early Childhood Care Education is the most important level of education because it is the foundation on which other levels of education are built. It is the root of the education of an individual. In the same vein, the role of the counsellors in early childhood education cannot be overemphasized. It has been observed that in Nigeria

today little or no attention has been given to Counselling at this level of education. One of the principles of guidance and counselling is that it should be practiced at all levels; therefore the involvement of professional counsellors at this level of education is very important. This is because it could help children at younger age to achieve more academic success that is well guided which will enable them navigate successfully the other levels of education. Counselling interventions at Early Childhood Education level can assist learners at an early stage of education to adjust and acquire self understanding which could contribute to their successful education as well as maximize their future well being. Counsellors have great role to play in promoting effective learning in Early Childhood Education. It is therefore, important that guidance and counselling should be an integral part of early child education in Nigeria as a means of enhancing the attainment of its educational objectives as well as sustainable development.

## Conclusion

Early childhood education is an asset of immense value in the later academic pursuit of a child and much more lately in life. This early experience exposes the child to all fields which make him more apt to learn in the primary level as the confidence in his learning capabilities which he acquired from the nursery school is lifted to the primary school and thereafter to all levels of his education. This eventually aids and facilitates his learning. The early childhood institution aims at developing the cognitive and affective potential at an early age. Anderson (2002) is of the view that when children are exposed to early childhood education, they develop superior communication skills, necessary physical ability and social unity needed in adult life and an increased cognitive and effective educational balance. Piaget (1995) spoke on the different effects of the environment on the growth of mental structures of the child which facilitates learning. He said that the environment stimulates learning and the development of the cognitive domain that the early years hold the key to learning. There is therefore the need for special attention to be given to the sensitive nature of early learning by affording the child the right environment where he will develop the potentials and skills for later life experience and education and thereby promote sustainable education.

## Recommendations

- The government should encourage Early childhood education by providing the needed educational facilities such as classrooms, instructional materials, and equipments for the success of the programme.
- Government to embark on proper enlightenment campaign on the importance of early childhood education through the media so as to encourage parents to take their children to early childhood education centres.
- Parents should as much as possible be involved in their children's early education experience by providing the necessary materials.
- Educational Planners should come up with adequate programmes, policies and curriculum for early childhood education.
- The government should make guidance and counselling an integral part of early child education in Nigeria this will be a means of enhancing the attainment of its educational objectives as well as sustainable development.

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