

The Gap in the Policy and Practice of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE): Universal Basic Education (UBE) Component in Nigeria

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Abstract: The gap between the policy and practice of early childhood care, development and education (ECCDE) as an integral part of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is the thrust of this paper. Contained in the National Policy on Education (NPE), 2004, 2013 editions and the UBE Act, 2004 is the recognition of ECCDE as a component of UBE. An official policy documentation of ECCDE as a component of UBE remains a mere policy statement. In practice, particularly the 6-3-3-4 system of education; the 6years of primary schooling which is given as the first level of education is accorded priority. ECCDE has truly received policy attention, but not yet a practical and serious government's enforcement. The points to the fact that the significance of ECCDE is yet to be well appreciated, except for the private individuals (proprietors of schools) whose aim of involvement in the early childhood education is profit making, rather than its contributions to the social and economic growth of the country. The objectives of this paper are focused on conceptual clarifications, emphasising the significance of ECCDE as a component of UBE and capturing its relevance to overall growth of the country's social and economic development. The various problems of ECCDE from both the global and local perspectives are highlighted, indicating the gap between policy and practice. The paper did not conclude without identifying possible and workable solutions to the problems. Suggestions are ultimately rendered calling on government and other stakeholders to be responsive and pragmatic in playing their roles to bring about the needed national growth and development.

Keywords: Gap, Policy, Practice, Early-Childhood Care, Development, Education, Universal Basic Education

Introduction

It has always been recognised in the theory and practice of education of many developed nations of the world that policies formulated are in most cases not implemented. The case of Nigeria could be worst. As observed and asked by Abdulrahman & Ogbondah (2007) on the issue of policy and reforms, thus:

There are a lot more provisions of the Nigerian National Policy on Education which are well theoretically stated and capable of turning the entire system of Nigerian education around for better, if not the best. Most of these provisions are workable, well articulated and directed on paper, but which are not put into use, rather, reforms are what we still believe that are needed when the very many useful provisions of the policy have not been put to test; is it not when a policy has been tried and turned out not to be yielding results that reforms may be in sight?

Nigeria is blessed with best brains, excellent administrators and articulate policy-makers, however, the situation in her educational system remains 'policy indigestion and implementation diarrhoea'. Beautiful and non-sustained policies continually formulated and lack of proactive implementation.

From the background of education as a right of everyone, the recognition of education as a right of every child is a global charter derivable from the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, Eheazu (1998:6) in Okorosaye-Orubite (2008) portrays that:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

Having recognised this fact and whatever the posture of education before the UN charter in different countries of the world, provision of education to the citizenry has come to overtake the lethargy and

lackadaisical notion or attitude of parents or State about educating the people. Modern education is globally acknowledged as an instrument for individual and societal development, not excluding the array of accruable benefits of social recognition, political relevance and economic prosperity.

As maintained above, individuals, communities, State and the Nations of this 21st Century desire development, hence the training of the mind to effect the desired development. By this identification of education as a veritable tool to bring about the development of the individuals and the communities, it beholds that the mind be trained early enough to conceive the ideals of self and societal development. Elementary education had long been identified as a starting point for the development of man who will subsequently and potentially develop the society.

Before the society begins to have influence on the child, the child is better be made to utilise his senses to conceive and perceive how to positively influence the society first. According to a British philosopher John Locke who argues that the only way to apprehend reality is through the experience of the senses. In his major work entitled *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690, Locke states that the mind of an individual is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, upon which experience imprints knowledge. In short, what the child will grow up to offer the society must be made available early before the society itself bequeaths negative ideals into the child.

In this regard, elementary education beginning at the age 5 to 6 years has no doubt given the child societal influence already, but starting before this period goes a long way to allowing the child conceive and perceive how he can grow to positively influence the society. Starting at an early age makes the child grow and develop into a responsible citizen when provided with the needed orientation, values and supports. Education at this level is aimed at providing the child with the opportunity of exposing their latent skills for development and education. For clarification, let us consider the meaning of the concept:

What is Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE)?

ECCDE is a pre-primary care and education given to aid physical, social psychological and mental growth and development of the child. This form of education is the one captured variedly as Day-care, Playgroup, Crèche, Kindergarten and Nursery. In his own view, Ojameruaye (2010) sees ECCDE basically as that which is the care and education of children from birth to primary school age (5+ or 6years), focusing on children's survival, growth, development and learning - including health, nutrition, hygiene, as well as cognitive, social, physical and emotional development.

In other words, ECCDE is the children's care, development and education from birth to the period of exposure to primary schooling experience in the formal, informal and non-formal settings. The care in this context is given from birth and the aspect of education takes off from around the age of two when cognition begins to manifest, i.e. ability to acquire knowledge: the mental faculty or process of acquiring knowledge by the use of reasoning, intuition, or perception. Both the care and education promote child's growth and development.

In furtherance of this conceptual clarification, Early Childhood Care Education according Ojameruaye (2010), covers very diverse arrangements, from parenting programs to community-based child care, center-based provision and formal pre-primary education, often in school. ECCDE programmes typically aim at two age groups: (i) *children under 3 years*; and (ii) *children from age 3 to primary school* (usually by age 5+ or 6years in the case of Nigeria).

The 2015 target for the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) left a number of developing countries, mostly in Africa with much to still desire. The Goal No. 2 which specifically envisaged the achievement of Universal primary education by the end of 2015 became a mirage, as it achieved nothing on the early childhood education progress. The newly introduced Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will definitely be unrealisable without the ECCDE. Success story of any educational attainment is predicated on the foundation of such educational programme. ECCDE is even recognised and captured in the UBE Act, 2004. ECCDE, as enshrined in the Act, is inclusive of the scope of UBE, reflected in the UBEC Standard Action Plan which was developed in line with the UBE Act, 2004. In fact, the Act according to Ejie (2009) goes beyond the requirements for meeting the MDGs; as it also encompasses programmes for early childhood care. The Sustainable Development Goals of 2016 were instituted to build on the MDGs that ended in 2015. These SDGs reaffirms commitment of the UN to educational progress of the world; as exemplified in the Goal Number 4, emphasising quality education. Contributing to the confirmation of ECCDE as a component of UBE are

Adepoju & Fabiyi (2007) rendering the scope of UBE to include programmes and initiatives for early childhood education and development, the six year primary education and the three year junior secondary school.

ECCDE is an important component of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) accommodating all forms of pre-primary education. The terms preschool education and kindergarten emphasize education around the ages of 2 to 5+ or 6years in the case of Nigeria. The National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) clearly highlights the purposes of ECCDE as to:

- i. Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- ii. Prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- iii. Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, Offices, etc);
- iv. Inculcate social norms;
- v. Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys;
- vi. Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;
- vii. Learn good habits, especially good health habits, and
- viii. Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc, through play.

The terms "early childhood learning," "early care," and "early education" are comparable with *early childhood education*. The terms Day care and Childcare do not embrace the educational aspects. Many childcare centers are now using more educational approaches. They are creating curricula and incorporating it into their daily routines to foster greater educational learning.

The Nigeria's Need of ECCDE

Before now, formalizing the ECCDE was considered needless in Nigeria, because the society was safe, conducive for child's learning, growth and development. The adult members of the society were readily available and willing to help and guide the child in his developmental processes, even with or without the presence of the parents. Today, the environment is hostile and not safe, mothers are economically engaged and children cannot safely be in the care of neighbours, because of the increasing incidences of child's sexual molestation; food poisoning and ritual killings, etc.

In averting this ugly cankerworm of today, better option may be the acceptance and promotion of ECCDE as noted by Ojameruaye and thus:

- ECCDE is a right, recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child which has been ratified by almost all countries of the world.
- Early Childhood is a period of remarkable brain development that lays the foundation for later learning. Therefore, access to ECCDE will generally give children the needed foundations for better performance later in primary and secondary schools, and perhaps at the tertiary level.
- ECCDE can provide the children with knowledge of imbibing good health habits which ultimately improves their well-being, especially in developing countries where hygienic practices are lacking.
- ECCE is socially cost-effective in the long-term: it is more cost-effective to institute preventive measures and support children early on in life than to compensate for disadvantage as they grow older.
- Affordable and reliable childcare provides essential support for working parents, especially mothers, and enhances women empowerment and household income and welfare.
- Investment in ECCDE yields very high economic returns, offsetting disadvantage and inequality, especially for children from poor families.

The Summary of ECCDE Characteristics from the Global Scenes

Reviewed literature has proven to show that the situation in the policy and practice of early childhood education is diverse across the globe, the following highlights are corroborative of these situations:

- The youngest children have been neglected the world over in terms of care and learning. Many countries have no formal programs for children under 3 years.
- Although enrollment in pre-primary education has tripled since 1970, it remains very low in most of the developed world.
- Among the developing countries, Latin America (60.8%), the Caribbean (100%) and the Pacific (72%) have the highest pre-primary gross enrollment ratios. Regionally, sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest rate of 12.4% below Arab States at 15.7% and Central Asia at 26.9%.
- The private sector is prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, Arab States, the Caribbean and East Asia in the provision of ECCDE.

- There are large disparities within countries. Children from poorer and rural households have less access to ECCE than those from richer and urban households
- The children most likely to benefit from ECCE programs – the poor- are the least likely to be enrolled
- ECCDE staff in many developing countries have minimal (often inadequate or none) education and pre-service training, and are often poorly remunerated
- Governments accord relatively low priority to pre-primary education in their spending
- ECCDE is not a priority for most donor agencies. Most allocate less than 2% of what they give for primary education to ECCDE.

ECCDE Situations and Problems in Nigeria

Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDE) in Nigeria has been an integral UBE component of UBE since 2013. This is the kind of education recognised by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013), given to children aged 0-4 years, situated in daycare or crèches, fully in the hands of private sector and social development services, whilst ages 5-6 (pre-primary) are within the formal education sector.

As revealed in Abdulrahman (2017), the Government's intention for this level of education is predicated on smooth transition of the child from home to the school, inculcation of social, moral norms and values as well as their overall development. In the real practice of ECCDE in Nigeria, what characterises early childhood education in the overall assessment is that:

- Education at this level (in daycare, crèche or at the pre-primary) is implemented with the 'interpretation' of the private providers and not how it was conceived by government
- Most private providers of pre-primary level of education are committed to fees charged than the services – no playground and other required play materials to achieve the goal of overall development of the child.
- On a year pre-primary, has this seen the light of the day for implementation, particularly in Nigerian public schools? Most Nigerian public primary schools have no provision for this, except under Governor Amaechi of Rivers State where the constructed Model Primary Schools made provision for these pre-primary sections in them.
- Another important reason for this level of education is the provision of adequate care, supervision and security of the children while their parents are at work.
- Can this work in the case of all workers (public or private), when government is not a pragmatic player in education at this level, since only the private providers in the business are charging high fees; not affordable for the targets?

The privately-owned centres are run on a commercial, fee-paying basis. The fees charged usually depend on the quality of the teachers and facilities provided. However, the UBE Act (2004) integrated pre-school education into UBE Programme as an essential component, Every public primary school, from the government perspective and policy frameworks is now expected to include a pre-primary/ECC centre which, like the primary school component, should be non-fee paying and services provided free.

An inventory of Early Childhood Education facilities in Nigeria conducted by FGN/NERDC/UNICEF in 2003 showed that most of the ECC facilities are privately owned (42% of the sample population) and 34% by the government, followed by 21% by local communities. These findings are consistent with the ESA 2003 study, which also indicated a greater private ownership (57%) of ECC facilities, compared to ownership by the government (42%). Now that the Early Childhood Development programme is covered by the UBE law, government ownership at state/LGA/community levels is certain to increase, particularly regarding centres catering for the 3-5 year olds. However the challenge remains as to the role of UBEC and SUBEBS on issues relating to the 0-3 year olds and who, beyond caregivers and communities, should assist on those issues.

Studies have shown that many parents in Nigeria do not value pre-primary school education due to distrust, poor quality, high cost and the notion that the child must be close to the warmth of the mother before primary school age. The policy document states the objectives of pre-primary education in the country and measures to ensure their achievement.

However, very little has been done so far to realize the objectives other than the 1991-1995 and 1997-2001 FGN/UNICEF Cooperative Agreement in Basic Education through which UNICEF provided assistance to some States for ECCDE activities. Under this program, about 2,045 low-cost ECCDE centers were established in 12 States catering for only 174,748 children aged between 3 and 5 years out of an estimated population of over 25 million children below the age of 6 years in the country.

The FGN/UNICEF ECCDE program is an example of best practice that needs to be replicated throughout the country. The centers are run with NGOs and combine education for children with lessons on health and education, nutrition and sanitation for their mothers.

Adoption and acceptance of ECCDE in Nigeria is characterised by the good and the bad. According to UNICEF/EFA Report (2000):

Though appreciable progress has been made in early childhood care and education in the past four years due to government policy requiring every public school to have a pre-primary school linkage, the proportion of children enrolled in pre-primary Early Childhood Care Centres still remains low at approximately 2.3 million children. This represents about 21 per cent of the population of children in this age group”.

It has been found that the caregivers of these centers are generally unqualified. About 85 per cent of them do not possess basic qualifications and more than half have no formal education. Another major issue in Nigeria’s early childhood care development and education is the poor state of the infrastructure, equipment, facilities and learning resources. Essential learning resources are lacking in most facilities. National curriculum is not yet widely operational. Though the NERDC is responsible for this but hitherto, no uniform curriculum has been evolved to cater for ECCDE in the country.

Other areas of concern as captured in the EFA Report of 2000 about ECCDE by this researcher requiring attention for the promotion of ECCDE as an integral part of UBE. These are therefore presented thus:

- **Political Will:** Develop interest in the full implementation and promotion of ECCDE through a high level political will and support.
- **Policy:** Formulation of policy that will include ECCDE in key government documents such as the national/state/local government plans, budget and education plan.
- **Funding:** Increased and better-targeted public funding of ECCDE, with particular attention to poor children in urban and rural areas and children with disabilities on one hand and on the other, increased allocation of funds to ECCDE programs by partnering donor agencies and the private sector
- **Standards:** Well-enforced national quality standards covering public and private provision for all age groups.
- **Staffing:** Access to appropriate training, quality standards and remuneration that retains trained staff; continuity in staffing.
- **Partnership:** Parental and community involvement as well as strong partnerships between government and the private sector.
- **Regulation:** Supervision, quality control and regulation by government
- **Training:** Mainstreaming of the early childhood education course into pre-service teacher training from the 2008/2009 session is expected to provide strategic solutions to some of the itemised problems. (EFA 2000 Assessment Country Report).

Conclusion

Boorer in Abdulrahman (2006) reveals that in many countries, the earliest age when state education becomes available is five years. Why then is there a demand for nursery schools for under-five and pre-school playgroups for children as young as two years? The demand may come in part for economic, social and even religious reasons. Economically, mothers may want a child-minding/minder’s service so that they can go out to work.

Importantly too, the issue parallels the question of providing enriched environments and of identifying and realising the individuals learning potentials. Freud pointed out that the first five years after birth were vital to the personality development of the child. It now seems that there is sufficient evidence to justify a claim for the first five years of life being vital to the cognitive development of the individual, particularly vital being the quality of the child’s experiences within that period. Evidence is being gathered from psychology laboratories throughout the world, from community studies and studies of families in their homes. The investigators have concluded, almost without exception, that the child is a highly capable and sophisticated learning organism and that the functioning begins at birth. The child is not simply the focal point for a food and drink supply, he needs stimulation from an interesting environment full of both objects and people.

In 1930’s, ‘maternal deprivation’ studies focused attention on the need for a stimulating environment if the child was to have a chance to develop adequately. These studies point the way, but what can be done? One

answer is to provide playgroups or nursery schools which are deliberately designed to offer the stimulation needed by the child. Such stimulation may reflect a quality of environment which the mother is unable or unwilling to offer; the playgroup movement grew out of an attempt to combat the physical and mental deprivation suffered by many children in larger cities.

Ideally, what is needed is a way of ascertaining the intellectual potential of any individual and then showing that children who attend playgroups or nursery schools are more likely than other children to reach that potential. This cannot be done, however, since such instruments do not as yet exist. All that can be said with certainty is that there is a mounting quantity of evidence to suggest that the first five years of a child's life are vital to his intellectual and emotional development. If the parents and family unit are unable to provide this richness of experience then the provision of some type of education, in the widest sense, may serve to ensure the quality of those early years (Boorer, 1977).

Suggestions

In addressing a number of identified problems and other areas requiring attention in ECCDE, Government has to be more responsive and pragmatic in imbibing a culture of implementing her educational policies. From the foregoing, ECCDE has been identified as a very important segment of education, and then the Government should therefore not allow ECCDE to be left only in the hands of the private establishments which are now actively developing this segment by massive establishment and development of pre-primary education, but with the aim of making profit.

Furthermore, Government should redouble her efforts in the promotion and sustenance of this segment of education for national development. In Rivers State for instance, Government has recognised the importance of ECCDE by being proactive about it, whereas in some other States of the Federation, ECCDE is entirely in the hands of the private, NO Government's involvement at all. Though, only 50 transition classes (Kindergarten) are attached to the established model schools by the Rivers State Government which even the number is not enough to rejoice about until all the primary schools in the State and of course in the whole Nigeria are transformed in full scale to accommodate ECCDE section.

The UBE Act (2004) has an expanded scope which includes programmes and initiatives for early childhood care development and education. The UBE Programme has made provision for every public primary school to have a Pre-Primary school linkage to cater for children aged 3-5 years. The act is silent on early childhood care development and education in the age group 0-3 years (UNESCO, 2006). The silence of the Nigerian Government about ECCDE goes beyond UNESCO's submission of only age group 0-3years. This silence is extended to age 3-5 year, because nothing is practically, seriously and operationally happening in response to the provisions of UBE Act. However, the reaction of government has now accommodates ECCDE as part and parcel of national educational provision, making it a more expanded programme of pre-primary level of education. As indicated above, the national education policy document has recognised ECCDE from 0-4 years and pre-primary education, from 5-6 years (FRN, 2013). What is still observable in the real sense of practice is the gap which exists, which is the non-implementation of specific policy on early childhood education.

From the foregoing, to address the situation in the practice of ECCDE in Nigeria, a number of things must be taken into consideration, such that include among others:

- i. Strengthening and implementing the policy which has been formulated. The policy and the Act accommodated the ECCDE as a component of UBE. Demonstration of high level of commitment to serious and practical implementation of formulated policies will salvage our ailing education system. Also, broadening or reviewing the policy to involve all by specifying the roles and responsibilities of key players as well as fulfilling budgetary commitments across sectors and levels of government.
- ii. Existing experts of ECCDE can be commissioned to champion the development of uniform curriculum on ECCDE which is presently non-existent. State Governments should therefore not wait for the NERDC (Federal Government agency with sole responsibility of developing the curriculum) to come up with the curriculum before full take off of the ECCDE which is an integral part of UBE but still suffering deserved attention due to silence on practical implementation.
- iii. Sincere and committed involvement of Governments in the various States of the Federation should be demonstrated with high level of seriousness and passion, not cosmetic or lip-service attention, as the care-free attitude has left only the providers playing active role and with ultimate goals of making profit, often times, sacrificing quality.
- iv. In the training of teachers for this level of education, research in the early childhood education programme, government should motivate the stakeholders of the programme and encourage or mandate the

establishment of the Departments/Units of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE) in the various Faculties of Education of their Universities, Universities of Education and Colleges.

- v. Training of teachers and retraining of available specialist teachers of ECCDE by various State Governments in the country (pre-service and in-service). Refresher courses/workshops to be organized for the existing teachers (in-service) during vacations.

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