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TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE GOAL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CARE EDUCATION IN GLOBAL EDUCATION FOR ALL (EFA)

N. O. Ayoola; M.D. Amosun and T. T. Eyengho

Abstract

The multiple benefits that early childhood and care education has on children for their nutrition, health and educational development and the role of high quality programmes on offsetting disadvantage and inequality has been recognized in recent times. This therefore explains why the rate of development of any nation is closely tied to early childhood and care education. Yet the enormous influence that early childhood and care education has on children and national development is far from being realized as envisaged. This paper therefore focuses on the first Education for All (EFA) goals, which deal with expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education. The paper, also mentions the constraints hindering its achievement and suggests ways by which the goal can be achieved.

Education has always been employed in modern societies for the attainment of national development. It is a vital process in human development and environmental management (Oyekan, 2000). This perhaps is the reason why education is referred to as "an instrument par excellence" (NPE, 2004, revised). However without good and solid foundation, of which early childhood and care education is most prominent, no high level of achievement can take place. This is because early childhood and care education is capable of giving all people an educational start and compensating for past failures (EFA, 2008). Yet important as the field of early childhood and care education is, it has been confined to suffer neglect from national governments and international community.

Available records show that early childhood and care education was given a prominent position during the world declaration on education for all in Jomtien, Thailand in 2000 which stated that everyone has a right to education (EFA, 2008). This is sequel to the report of EFA assessment which revealed that at the start of the new millennium:

- (i) Of the more than 800 million children under 6 years of age, fewer than a third benefited from any form of early childhood education.
- (ii) Some 113 million children, 60 percent of whom were girls had no access to primary schooling.
- (iii) At least 880 million adults were illiterate of whom the majority were women (EFA, 2008). The report above underscored the need for the global Education for All (EFA) goal number one which is to "expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children".

However since year 2000, when the above goal was made, the progress towards achieving the goals for early childhood had been slow (EFA, 2008). The implication of this is that come 2015, Nigeria will not be able to achieve the goal. This is why this paper looks at the following questions:

- (i) What are the constraints hindering the achievement of early childhood and care education goal in Education for All plan?
- (ii) How can the goal be achieved?

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N. O. Ayoola; M.D. Amosun and T. T. Eyengho

Early Childhood and Care Education

Early Childhood and Care Education (ECCE) is a term adopted by the global EFA initiative that aptly describes the community efforts required to ensure a child's head start in life and to lay the foundations for a life of learning (Obanya, 2007). The concept, early childhood and care education was formally referred to as pre-primary education in the national policy on education as "the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3-5 plus prior to their entering the primary school.

However, since EFA summit in the year 2000 in Dakar, the scope of early childhood and care education has been diversified. It is more than pre-schooling activities. Pre-schooling is only a small part of the enormous life start responsibilities that the society owes the young child (Fowowe and Oshin, 2010).

Early childhood and care education in Nigeria has metamorphosed from a single sectorial approach to a multi-sectional pursuit converging interventions in health, nutrition, care, stimulation, protection and participation of the child (Fowowe and Akinduotu, 2010). The contemporary view of early childhood and care education is that which takes full account of the all-round development needs of all the children especially the not-yet-in school children (Obanya, 2004). It is therefore necessary to inform the stakeholders of the need to take this level of education seriously in order to make it achieve its contribution to the development of our nation.

Purpose of Early Childhood and Care Education

The objective and purpose of early childhood and care education have been clearly stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) they are:

- a) effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- b) prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- c) provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work on the farm, in the markets, offices, etc;
- d) inculcate social norms;
- e) inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc;
- f) develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit;
- g) learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
- h) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters colours, shapes, forms etc through play.

In addition to the above, the global education for all goal for early childhood and care education is to "expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children (EFA, 2008). The expansion and comprehensive aspects can be aptly captured by ECCDE programme in Nigeria, which represents a comprehensive union of support for child development, encompassing teaching practices, relationship with parents, and connections with other community agencies and institutions. The expansion aspect also caters for the vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

According to EFA (2008) report, after the declaration of education for all goal in the year 2000:

a) Immunization campaigns and improved access to basic health facilities have led to a significant decline in child mortality.

Towards Achieving the Goal for Early Childhood and Care Education in Global Education for all (EFA)

b) The supply of pre-primary education to children aged 3 and above has improved because early childhood and care education is presently receiving attention.
However, it is on record that, in sub-Saharan Africa in general, early childhood programmes are still not a priority and interventions are mostly urban-based and provided by the non-state sector

from the studies for Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Ruanda (EFA, 2008). In the light of this, some constraints that are hindering the growth of early childhood and care education in Nigeria will be highlighted.

Constraints of Early Childhood and Care Education in Nigeria

The constraints are many, but the assessment report by (EFA (2008) revealed the following:

- (i) The comprehensive care and education of children below age 3 remain neglected area and one difficult to monitor for want of adequate data.
- (ii) Children who enrolled at the pre-primary level are more likely to come from more affluent households while enrolment of the poor remains low -yet it is the poor who stand to gain relatively the most from early childhood programmes.
- (iii) The supply of pre-primary education to children aged 3 and above remains very uneven.
- (iv) Nigeria still has limited pre-primary education system; where they exist at all, too often they combine very low enrolment ratios with insufficient numbers of teachers.
- (v) Shortages of trained pre-primary teachers resulting in high pupil / teacher ratios.
- (vi) Access of early childhood and care education among less advantaged children, especially in vulnerable contexts is very limited.
- (vii) Gender disparities exist in pre-primary education though they are less marked than at other levels of education.

The constraints mentioned above here are not exhaustive, there are still many more, however those mentioned here are directly related to the goal as documented in education for all with regards to early childhood education. How then can we remove or minimize the constraint hindering the achievement of EFA goal for early childhood and care education?

Achieving EFA Goal for ECCE

The achievement of EFA goals and especially ECCE goal can be realized if the following suggestions are taken:

- (i) Government must take full responsibility for the provision of quality early childhood and care education
- (ii) Inclusion should be provided for the marginalized and disadvantaged children.
- (iii) Government should increase her expenditure for the financing of ECCE.
- (iv) Providing financial support such as scholarships, cash or in-kind transfers to households, appropriately targeted.
- Developing constructive partnership between governments and the non-state sector to increase access to quality ECCE.
- (vi) Having accurate statistics on the number of children aged zero to six in every locality.
- (vii) Working with the people to develop comprehensive care and education strategies that fully integrate health nutrition, socialization, physical development and intellectual stimulation of pre-school children.

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Conclusion

The rate at which early childhood and care education is being emphasized globally and locally means that it is a field of education par excellence that is capable of reducing existing and future disadvantages faced by many children and nations through addressing the nutritional, health and educational needs. These benefits will only be achieved if all the stakeholders on early childhood and care education will cooperate and be determined to work together to make progress which this field of education can offer.

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