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Need for Specialist Teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Delivery for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Nwanekezi, A. U. - Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

E-mail: aukeze@yahoo.com

&

Onyekuru, Bruno

Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract

The paper examined the need to engage specialist teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) delivery in Nigeria. To effectively do this, the researchers discussed the concept of early childhood/pre-primary education, its objectives were outlined, and the importance of qualified teachers who specialized in childhood education was discussed. Professional ethics for early childhood/pre-primary education were looked into; early childhood/pre-primary education for sustainable development was addressed. Consequently, the paper concluded that every nation of the world ascribes for quality education. The quality of education of any country depends on the quality of her teachers. Early childhood education being the

foundation of all levels of education should be handled by teachers who are specialists in the area, well trained and certificated by recognized higher institutions (national or international). It was recommended among others that regular workshops, conferences and other teacher-development programmes be organized for the serving teachers to update them with the latest research findings.

Key words: Specialist Teachers, Early childhood, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Early childhood is one of the major stages in ones development in life. It is a period between toddler and pre-school years (1 to 5 years); the most formative and delicate period of the child's life. Kaga 2001 in Ochuonye (2011) opined that it is a stage of growing up which extends beyond physical development to involve significant changes in a child's behaviour, thought processes, emotions and attitude which largely determine the kind of adult that a child will become.

Most parents; literates and illiterates as well struggle to meet ends, thereby using nursery provisions to complement home care for their young children. In situations where they cannot afford the bills of the nursery provisions, the alternative becomes leaving these young ones at the mercy of house helps, nannies, peers or neighbours that seem less busy at any time. Also some enlightened parents, with the realization of importance of early education decide to send their young children to nursery schools as to inculcate right value before primary school age. The quality of value these young children may acquire at this early stage depends on the quality of the teachers that handle them, to these young learners, "whatever the teachers say or do stand not to be corrected".

The federal government, the state government, parents and the society at large are looking up to shaping the young ones through education and the only persons that can perform this important task are the teachers and not the "cheaters". Against this backdrop, the paper intend examining the need to engage teachers who have gone through

pedagogy and specialized in early childhood education in recognized higher institutions to teach at this level.

The concept of early childhood/pre-primary education

Early Childhood/Pre-Primary Education is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering into primary education. It includes crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten (FRN, 2004). Going by the above definition Oniyama (2011) observed that early childhood education refers to the educational provisions be it formal or informal, which a child is exposed to, from birth to the statutory school age of six in Nigeria. This shows that the child's early education is not influenced by formal school system alone but parents, siblings, peers, the mass media and the environment the child lives in. to Maduiké (2011) early childhood care is therefore conceptualized as encompassing the care, development and education of children below six years. For this purpose, early childhood education is seen as the first phase in a life time of continuous learning and experiencing from birth to old age. It is the foundation for a lifelong learning.

The world declaration on the survival, protection and development of children in 1999 undertook a joint commitment and to make an urgent universal appeal to give every child a better future. The conference on education for all and the convention on the rights of the child also emphasized most urgent priority to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for all children (Maduiké 2011). Jamitien declaration on Education For All (EFA) states that "learning begins at birth", thereby making the early childcare the bedrock of basic education programme worldwide. Maduiké (2011) maintained that education played a crucial role in reducing poverty and inequality, improving child and maternal health and strengthening democracy. There is strong evidence linking education to higher economic and productivity which makes for human development for sustainable development. Early childhood Education therefore covers all aspects of developmental interaction between the child and his environment.

The purpose of early childhood/pre-primary education

Parents in Nigeria have different reasons for sending their children to pre-school institutions as the researchers earlier mentioned in the introduction. Education is supposed to be a joint responsibility of school and home. In support of this Nyonyintono (1979) in Oniyama (2011) noted that in Africa today, there is universal high ambition for formal education. All parents regardless of their own educational and professional achievements have higher educational aspiration for their children. Oduowolu (2000) observed that opinion differs on what the child should learn in order to achieve their aims or become ideal persons. The parents and the society see nursery school as a place that complements home efforts in the upbringing of the child. Some children come from homes that are educationally disadvantaged. In fact, many homes in Nigeria are in this situation especially in the rural and slum areas. Children have no access to toys, pictures, radios, televisions, colours, books etc. Nursery schools provide these facilities for such children.

The government is equally concerned about the education of the pre-school child. This is why National Policy on Education (2004) specifically stated that the objectives of early childhood/pre-primary education shall be to:

- Effect a smooth transition from home to school.
- Prepare the child for the primary level of education.
- Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work.
- Inculcate social norms.
- Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys etc.
- Develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit.

- Learn good habits and
- Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play.

Importance of specialist teachers for early childhood/pre-primary education delivery

The above objectives of early childhood/pre-primary education in Nigeria are excellent but cannot be achieved without teachers who specialized in early childhood/pre-primary education in recognized educational institution. No one gives what he does not have. Gbamanja (1991) in buttressing the importance of a specialist teacher, made the following assertions:-

- A non-teacher cheats
- A poor teacher tells
- An average or mediocre teacher informs
- A good teacher teaches
- An excellent teacher inspires

Going by the above assertions, a person may have teaching qualification but not a specialist in a particular area. This is to say that in education, individuals have their areas of specialization. This makes one a specialist in that particular area he specialized in. In view of this, an early childhood educator (teacher) is one who went through the pedagogy; study the characteristics of the early childhood learner and the professional ethics of Childhood Education in a recognized Educational institution. Consequently, an early childhood educator (teacher) is a single most important factor in the moulding of children at the pre-primary education level. This may be attributed to the fact that at the pre-school setting, each teacher has a class where he stays with the children for most of the term and teaches them the whole curriculum. The relationship at this stage between the teacher and children tends to be closer that the teacher becomes a surrogate parent.

To effectively play this role, the teacher must require a good understanding of the characteristics of early childhood learner.

According to the National Policy on Education (2004), no education system rises above the quality of her teachers. This implies that, the teachers of pre-school education shall have in addition, good character and disposition that children will always emulate. The teacher should be rich in the application of the three domains of human behaviour as to be able to mould the young learners under his care.

Professional ethics and early childhood/pre-primary education

According to National Association for the Education of Young Children (NACYC) 1998, a code of ethics is a document that maps the profession's responsibility to society. Going by the above definition, Oniyama (2011) defined ethics as the science which enables us to understand humanity as it is and humanity as it could be, and then instructs us on how to move from one reality to the ideal. It is a professional responsibility that is carried out collectively and systematically by the membership of a profession.

Every profession has some distinctive value and ethical commitments and so early childhood educators (teachers) as professionals are not left out. The reason for specialist teachers who have gone through the professional course in the area of pre-school education is very crucial. This is because the commitment of every early childhood educator is more challenging than that of other professionals. Early childhood teachers face a lot of ethical pains which other professionals may not face. The early childhood teachers do not deal with a client as most other professionals such as doctors and lawyers. They encounter ethical issues more often because in any situation in the school system, teachers have obligations to a number of constituencies which include the school administrators, the children, parents, colleagues, Ministry of Education and the policy makers. The code of ethical conduct helps early childhood teachers to understand their responsibilities, prioritize their obligations and find wise solutions to

the dilemmas they face while carrying out their legitimate duties as teachers in school system (Oniyama, 2011).

According to the code of ethics of Early Childhood Educators of B.C in Oniyama (2011), ethics practice extends beyond the child practitioner relationship. Child care practitioners also support parents as primary care givers of their children and liaise with other professionals and community resources on behalf of children and families.

The ethical principles of practice which are intended to guide child care practitioners in deciding what conduct is most appropriate when they encounter ethical problems in the course of their work are outlined as follows:-

- Child care practitioners promote the health and well being of all children.
- Child care practitioners enable children to participate to their full potentials in environments carefully planned to serve individual needs and to facilitate the child's progress in the social, emotional, physical and cognitive areas of development.
- Child care practitioners demonstrate caring for all children in all aspects of their practice.
- Child care practitioners work in partnership with parents, recognizing that parents have primary responsibility for the care of their children, valuing their commitment to their children and supporting them in meeting their responsibilities to their children.
- Child care practitioners work in ways that enhance human dignity in trusting, caring and co-operative relationships that respect the worth and uniqueness of the individuals.

- Childcare practitioners pursue an ongoing basis, the knowledge, skills, self-awareness needed to be professionally competent.
- Child care practitioners demonstrate integrity in all their professional relationship.

Early childhood/pre-primary education for sustainable development

Okebukola (2009) in Maduiké (2011) pointed out that education has the contributing role of bustering the economy of a nation. In other words education is seen as a vehicle for national development. Development of a totality of the effort and achievement made to ensure that people in a society are equipped with necessary knowledge, skills, ability and their full potentials as human beings in order to contribute actively in other sectors of nation. In respect to this Maduwesi (2001) stated that the child should be well developed in basic skills so that he will be able to contribute to the economic development of his society. Functional education at the early childhood level is eminent for sustainable development.

Sustainability Education (ES), Education for sustainability (EFS) and Education for Sustainability Development (ESD) are interchangeable terms describing the practice of teaching for sustainability. ESD is the term used internationally and by the United Nations. The first international document that identified education as an essential tool for achieving sustainable development and highlighted areas of action for education was Agenda (Mekeown, 2002 in Maduiké 2011).

Ground work has been laid for sustainability education worldwide. Recent changes in service, learning, a focus on literacy and skills, standards that support inter-disciplinary thinking and the role of systems have all increased the visibility of the movement. Various approaches to education for sustainable Development encourages people to understand the complexities of, and synergies between the issue threatening planetary sustainability, understand and access their

own values and those of society in which they live in the concept of sustainability.

Early childhood is the act of developing the child with necessary knowledge, skills and attitude that will enable him function as an effective citizen in his environment. Education can only be functional if the child is considered pivot in the planning and implementation of learning experiences. The last century witnessed rapid economic, scientific and technological growth. There are series of breakthroughs in different fields including Information and Communication Technology. Recently, one witnesses a tremendous advancement globally in the area of scientific and technological growth. The implication is that Nigeria has to live up to the expected challenges. This of course has to start from early childhood stage because this is the period when acceptable values, social norms and attitudes can easily be inculcated in the child.

Maduiké (2011) noted that early childhood experience is of great importance for both mental and psychological success in later life. This is because it focuses the attention of the child to what is expected at the next level. The state of the future of Nigerian society will be determined by the kind of education foundation laid at this level. If the child's education is problem solving in nature, it will inculcate in him, skills and attitudes for sustainable development. Children need continuous interaction and stimulation with their environment in order to learn and go through a sequence of holistic development. Maduwesi (2005) opined that a child being a young, delicate and sensitive human should be handled with care and love. Consequently, care should be given to the child and education started early for the child since research shows that children who received good care during early childhood are more likely to benefit from later education and other services.

The importance of specialist teachers who have gone through the pedagogy of early childhood/pre-primary education, studied the characteristics of early childhood learner and the professional ethical code of pre-school education cannot be over emphasized. Since

sustainable development depends on the quality of manpower that is educated and developed; the teachers that carry out the tasks must be well trained. This is because the development that sustains this nation can only be through education and the pivots of this education are teachers.

Conclusion

Every nation of the world ascribes for quality education for sustainable development, Nigeria as a nation is not left out. The quality of education of any country depends on the quality of the teachers. It is a known fact that a nation cannot rise above the quality of her education. Early childhood education being the foundation of all levels of education should be handled by teachers who are specialists in the area, well trained and certificated by recognized institutions (national and international). This will help the nation attain sustainable development through quality education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and opinions of some eminent scholars on the subject matter, the following recommendations are put forward:-

1. Ministry of education should ensure that all the private pre-primary schools are well registered and are regularly inspected to be sure that quality is maintained.
2. Workshops, conferences and other teacher development programmes should regularly be organized for the pre-school serving teachers to equip them with latest research findings.
3. Teachers who are already in the system but not specialists in pre-school education should be encouraged to enroll for in-service training.

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