

The Benefits, Problems and Pioneers of Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Early childhood is a very significant stage in the life of all human beings. If anything goes wrong at this stage, the individual is marred forever. The education of a child at this stage should be paramount because this is the foundation of all education in an individual's life. Early childhood education encompasses variety of approaches and programmes designed to assist children from aged 0-6 years to develop their potentials in order to become active members of their communities. The paper therefore dwells on the meaning of early childhood, the benefits, problems and pioneers of early childhood education.

Keywords: Benefits, Problems, Pioneers, Early Childhood, Education.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever the term early childhood education is mentioned, it means there is thought and concern about children. That is, how to bring them up educationally to meet with the challenges of the society. It also shows that importance is given to children at that tender age. Early childhood is a very significant stage in the life of all human beings. If anything goes wrong at this stage, the individual is marred forever. The education of a child at this stage should be paramount because this is the foundation of all education in an individual's life. Early childhood education encompasses variety of approaches and programmes designed to assist children from aged 0-6 years to develop their potentials in order to become active members of their communities. Bowman, Donovan and Burns (2006) maintained that children come into the world eager to learn...there can be no doubt that environment in which a child grows up has a powerful impact on how the child develops and what he learns. This implies that early childhood education should make adequate provision for the education of the child hence the child has come into this world eagerly to learn. Everything necessary should be put in place to train the child irrespective of the environment.

THE CONCEPT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early childhood education is education for young children from 0-6 years of age. It is education meant to train children in order to acquire knowledge, skills and to develop their innate potentials both intellectually, physically, socially, spiritually, morally and psychologically. This is also education to integrate children at this age into the culture of the society in which they are born into so that they can participate fully and fit into the society when they grow up. Gordon and Brown (2004) see early childhood education as a group of settings deliberately intended to effect developmental changes in children from birth to the age of entering into first grade (primary school). The authors went further to say that more recent meanings of early childhood include the elementary years. Meaning, from birth to eight years of age. Also the national policy on education (FRN, 2004) state that early childhood education is education given in an educational institution to children prior to entering the primary school. That it includes crèche, the nursery and kindergarten.

In school terms, early childhood education includes group settings for infants through the primary years of elementary school. In practical terms, the education of young children includes formal and informal settings that will bring meaning into the lives of the children. Bredekamp and copple (1997) said that early childhood education refers to programmes and settings that serve young children from birth to the eight year of life. Complementing the authors, Jackman (2009) said that during these important years of birth to age eight, a child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth should be supported within the home, child care facility, school, and community. This is because each child learns differently.

POLICY STATEMENT ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

We cannot talk about early childhood education without mentioning what the federal government said concerning education at this stage. The Nigerian government has laudable plans for children from birth to eight years of age. According to the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), the following are the objectives of early childhood education:

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

When a closer look is taken of these objectives, it will be recognized that early childhood education is very important in the life of the child, the parents and the society at large. When a child is groomed at an early age, the child will certainly have a smooth transition to the primary level of education. Likewise, when the responsibility of child care is taken from the parents, they will be able to attend to other things like work, trade or farm where they can earn to carter for the

entire family. Also, this education will instill norms, values and ideals of the society in the child which will help him to develop and fit properly into the society in which he/she belongs.

PROBLEMS FACING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

There are problems facing the proper realization of the objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria. These problems are mostly felt in the public schools. Some of these problems according to UNICEF (2000) are as follows:

- The caregivers of these centers are generally unqualified: about 85 percent do not possess basic qualifications and more than half have no formal education.
- Another major issue in Nigeria's early childhood care and development is the poor state of the infrastructure, equipment, facilities and learning resources.
- Essential learning resources are also lacking in most schools.
- The national curriculum is not yet widely operational.

These problems can be resolved through mainstreaming of the early childhood education course into pre-service teacher training which is expected to provide strategic solutions to some of the itemized problems (UNICEF, 2000). Also the adequate provision of infrastructures, facilities, and learning materials can go a long way to solve the problems.

RATIONALE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

There are certain conditions that have warranted the introduction of early childhood education in the society or that have made it popular. Some of these are:

- Changes in the economy;
- Changes in family life;
- Public awareness of its importance; and
- Public support of the programme.

In this 21st century, much focus is on the changes in family life. These include:

- Rising cost of living.
- An increased number of dual income families.
- An increase in single parent families.
- An increased number of teenage parents.
- Greater mobility of families.
- Decrease in the impact of extended family.

BENEFITS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The benefits of early childhood education are:

- It relieves the burden of working parents;

- High quality early childhood programmes improves the lives of the children and families;
- It brings about substantial economic benefits to the society;
- It brings about greater schooling success;
- It lowers delinquency rates.

DISADVANTAGES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Even though there are numerous benefits of early childhood education, there are still some disadvantages for the child, parents and the society. This education at an early stage is disadvantageous to the child. This is because the child is detached from the mother and it brings a lot of stress to the child who now had to cope with strangers (care givers). A child from 0-3years is supposed to stay close to the mother to receive that motherly love and warmth. But when removed and taken to crèche, that warmth of affection is deprived. The deprivation of this would leave them with no option than to adapt that is why when they get adapted to the system and when they meet people who neither love nor care, the child may grow up without love or care for parents or neighbor.

Secondly, in our Nigerian society, immediately these children are dropped off for school at this stage when they are to play, they start teaching them things above their capacity and children who cannot cope are tagged block heads, but the teachers would fail to recognize that they are to be cared for and played with. This is why most times you find some children at this stage refusing to go to school.

Furthermore, a child or children sent to school early may become slow learners when they receive poor instruction at that early stage. Bruce and Meggitt (2005) maintained that there should be access for every child to quality instruction and that lack of access causes the following:

- Poor self-esteem
- Stereotyping and discrimination
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of respect
- Misunderstanding.

There can be no quality in early childhood services unless there is equal opportunity for every child and family to full participation in early childhood services. Separating a child from the mother at an early stage can amount to child abuse that is when a child is forced to learn when his/her brain is not set for schooling.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The history of early education is traced back to ancient Greece where philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle show keen interest to the needs of children and the significance of appropriate education in shaping their character. According to Essa (1999) the Greek tradition of education for girls as well as boys was carried out for several years into the light of Roman times. This was because the Greek saw human development as a transformation from the perfect state of childhood to the ideal adulthood (Sameroff, 1983). During the middle ages, many of the early enlightened ideas about children were lost and the concept of childhood seemed to have been

misplaced. Children were then regarded as property and put to work in the fields or tending animals. Essa (1999) acknowledged that schools and formal education as a way of passing on culture traditions had virtually disappeared in Europe except a few places like Islamic Spain where learning was valued. This indeed was the dark ages.

Around the sixteen century Martin Luther based on the activities of the various religious, political and economic forces that gave impetus to move out of the dark ages. He advocated for public education for all children in some parts of Europe due to some injustice that provided a life style that favored the noble at the expense of the poor and also some social political developed ideas that favored children and their education to overcome such inequality.

The eighteenth century witnesses the abuse of children in factories when the industrial revolution swept Europe and America, and factory owners were looking for cheap labor. This exploitation leads to reforms including universal public education and laws prohibiting child labor (Essa, 1999; Aries, 1962; Borstellman, 1983; Braun & Edwards, 1972).

According to Essa (1999) the twentieth century was a relatively short period but represents an active time in the formation of early childhood education. For instance education for all children became widely accepted and the idea that childhood is a separate and important period was reinforced. This period witness the idea of John Dewey who sees education as a training ground for democracy and a way of inculcating democratic ideas in children. Also of importance was the philosopher and scientist, Sigmund Freud who contributed immensely and focused attention of early experiences as a foundation of personality.

This period also witness the development of scientific methods of observation that led to child study movement (Essa, 1999). Out of this emerged university preschool laboratory programmes designed to aid careful study of children. The notion of the early childhood education was to help move out young children from the factories into schools.

Furthermore, the increasing need for child care arrangement for working parents has brought about the idea of early childhood education in the 20th and 21st centuries. Parents need to work to support their families and children need to be catered for, this has necessitated the great interest of both parents and the public in early childhood education.

Gordon and Browne (2004) asserted that some people say we are in the midst of a second revolution for young children, as two parents, single parents, and step parents all leave for work in greater numbers than ever before. Parents therefore rely on educators to teach their children from a young age including infants.

SOME PIONEERS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

JOHN LOCKE (1632-1714)

One of the earliest philosophers of education was John Locke and he is considered as the founder of modern educational philosophy. His theory was based on the scientific method and the study of the mind and learning. He advocate the concept of tabula rasa, the conception that a child is borne neutral and not evil and is a clean slate on which the experiences of others like parents, teachers, society, education and the world are written. He is the first European educationist that discusses the idea of individual differences and that it is better to observe one child rather than simply teaching a group. John Locke said that the purpose of education is to make man a reasonable creature. He also advocated for pleasant instructions for children which should

include play and drills. His influence on education was not felt strongly at his days but later popularized by Rousseau.

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712-1778)

Rousseau is the brain child of naturalism in the seventeenth century. He was a writer and a philosopher. He brought the idea that children were not totally evil but naturally good beings. Rousseau believed that education should reflect the natural goodness of the child and allow spontaneous interest and activities of the children. He further said that there is no original sin in the human heart and that the only natural passion is self-love or selfishness. Rousseau's ideas on education include:

- The true object of education should not be primarily a vocational one;
- Children only really learn from firsthand information;
- Children's view of the world is quite different from that of the adult;
- There are distinct phases of development of a child's mind and these should coincide with the various stages of education; and
- Teachers must be aware of these phases and coordinate their instruction appropriately (Boyd, 1997).

He insisted on using concrete teaching materials, learning the abstract and symbolism for the later years. His ideas are still followed in our schools till date. For instance free play for child is based on his belief in children inherent goodness and the ability to choose what they need to learn.

PESTALOZZI (1746-1827)

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was a great Swiss educator whose theories and caring for children form the basis of common practice in early childhood education. He used nature study as part of the curriculum and he believed that good education meant the total development of the senses. He stresses the idea of integrated curriculum which is meant to develop the whole child. That is physically, socially, morally, intellectually and other wise. He wanted education to be of the hand, the head and the heart of the child. The role of the teacher was a guide to self-activity through intuition exercise and the senses alongside intellectual content. He proposed teaching children in group as oppose to using a tutor with an individual child.

FROEBEL (1782-1852)

One of the major contributors to early childhood education was Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel. This is particularly seen in his organization of educational thoughts and ideas of learning, curriculum and teacher training. He is well known as the father of kindergarten. He devoted his life time to the development of a system of education for young children. The idea of kindergarten was his and he named it thus. Kindergarten is a German word meaning children's garden and that was what he wanted for children, a garden where children are raised and nurtured to develop their full potentials. He desired that early years of education should be pleasant, hence, his was unhappy. He advocated that children should be able to play, have toys and have trained teachers. He is the

first educationist to start a training school for teachers so that they would be able to handle little children.

In his book, education of man as noted by Hewes (1993), play was the highest phase of child development, the presentation of the inner necessity and impulse. Froebel advocated that both men and women should teach children and that they should be friendly facilitators other than stern disciplinarians.

Gordon and Browne (2004, p. 12) noted that every day, teachers in centers and homes ...practice the Froebelian belief that a child's first educational experiences should be a garden, full of pleasant discoveries and delightful adventures, where the adults' role is to plant ideas and materials for children to use as they grow at their own pace.

JOHN DEWEY (1858-1952)

John Dewey was an American professor of philosophy. He brought about the progressive movement in education. Dewey believed that children were valuable and that childhood was an important part of their lives. He felt that education provides a training ground for cooperative living and should be integrated with life itself. He believed that schools should be focused on the nature of the child. His belief about children and learning are summarized by Gordon and Browne (2004, p. 17) from his pedagogy creed thus:

- "... I believe that only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's power by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself."
- "... The child's own instinct and power furnish the material and give the starting point for all education."
- "... I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living."
- "... I believe that ... the school life should grow gradually out of the home life... it is the business of the school to deepen and extend ... the child's senses of the values bound up in his home life."
- "... I believe finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of a proper social life. I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling."

MONTESSORI (1870-1952)

Maria Montessori was the first female to attain a medical doctor degree in Italy. She worked with retarded children. She believed that these children's problems were more of education than medical. This was proved when she worked with these children and they were able to pass the regular examination with other children. She felt that what these children lack was motivation and environment. So in 1907, she opened a pre-school called Casa de Bambiru (children house). She started with 50 children and she designed materials that were self-correcting which she used in teaching the children. She further designed classrooms and learning method which were appropriate for young children. She believed that all children have a fundamental inborn intellectual structure that unfolds gradually as they developed, although individual differences are due to different environmental experiences. Her emphasis was on a prepared environment,

self-correcting and sequential materials, teaching through observation and a trust in children's innate drive to learn.

Montessori supported earlier educational ideas of sensory development; she felt that cognitive abilities of a child stem from sensory discrimination. This was why her materials were tactile and enhanced the senses as well as the mind. In her method, the role of the teacher is that of an observer and facilitator. This they do by demonstrating proper use of the material and communication as required.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it is good for children to be mature before sending them to school and if circumstances warrant them to be sent to crèche, the early childhood providers should ensure that qualified care givers are employed and that children at the tender age should be loved and cared for by allowing them to play, dance and sing and not to start teaching them alphabets and other things that are above them. Just like some of the pioneers of early childhood educator have suggested. Most importantly, the environment and the materials for teaching and learning were stressed by the pioneers of early childhood educators and teachers should act as observers, facilitators and give children a chance to choose what they will learn.

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