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## **Early Childhood Care and Education for All in 2015: Is this A Mirage in Nigeria?**

Esther A. Oduolowu

This paper examines the possibility of the provision of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all children from birth to age five in Nigeria by 2015. In the paper are the history of preschool education in Nigeria, situation of ECCE worldwide in the 1980s, and the global trends in basic education in the 1990s. The paper also examines the limitations of the attempt and offers probable solutions.

### **Introduction**

The history of early childhood education in Nigeria can be traced back to the Christian missionaries who introduced the Western formal education system to Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fafunwa, 1974). The earliest form of early childhood education was organized by church-members, particularly the wives of the missionaries, for young children. On Sundays for about an hour, church attendants organized into groups called Sunday school classes, one of the groups being for very young children. Attendance at these groups varied from Sunday to Sunday and the size of each group varied. The earliest church-based schools could be said to be actually formal schools in an informal setting. Teachers were attached to the groups. Such teachers were usually experienced members of the church who had knowledge and ability to teach the scriptures to the class. The class was held on Sunday morning between 10 and 11 a.m. The teacher started by introducing a number of short choruses, followed by a prayer and short stories from the Bible. At the end of each story, questions were asked. The class enjoyed the lesson because it was full of activities such as clapping of hands, singing, movement, dramatization, etc. After some time, such Sunday Schools metamorphosed into the nursery school of the church. The classes were then conducted from Monday to Friday, usually by young women with limited education. Children of church members and non-members were admitted.

Underage children of teachers in the primary school section were also admitted (Akinbote, Oduolowu, & Lawal 2001). The curriculum was largely based on the objectives of the doctrines of the church but counting, memorization, and songs were part of the content. The school then provided an opportunity for underage children who did not gain admission into primary classes to have an early start. It also served as child-minding facility for parents who worked outside their homes. The school was run usually on church premises and the teacher was paid from the church funds (Oduolowu, 2003).

The other form of preschools was established in the Government Reservation Areas by the wives of the Europeans living in the areas. It was considered the preserve of the children of the colonial officials. With the economic changes following rapid post-independence developments in Nigeria, more Nigerians started emulating the Europeans by sending their children to preschools (Kolawole, 1989; Oduolowu, 2003). In addition, the increase in the rate at which women picked up jobs outside their homes prompted the working mothers to send their children to preschool institutions where the children could be adequately cared for. The practice of putting children under the care of grandmothers, maids, and hired house help was no longer popular as a result of the evils associated with the practice (Maduewesi, 1999). Furthermore, research evidence show that children can benefit from the enriched opportunities for play both associated with indoor and outdoor activities, the companionship of the other children, and the privilege of having trained and understanding adults to interact with, which preschool settings provide. Therefore, the last three decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century witnessed a rapid expansion of preschool education program in Nigeria (Obanya, 2002). This is due to the high level of awareness of the program and its inherent benefits. The government of Nigeria is not left out of this awareness. The government is concerned with this level of education and therefore it featured prominently in the National Policy on Education of 1977, revised in 1981 and 1998. In that document, government refers to it as pre-primary education as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 plus. The 2004 edition of the National Policy on Education recognizes the period from birth to age 5 plus and refers to this level of education as the early childhood education period (Federal Government of Nigeria [FGN], 2004). It has to be noted that government effort at establishing this sub-sector of education stops at the policy level as the implementation comes more from the private individual and some institutional sponsored programs. This policy issue and the costs involved hinder access to the program. It is not accessible to all because it is limited to urban centers, capital, and commercial cities alone. Only the elites and very few others could patronize ECCE facilities.

### **Situation of Basic Education Worldwide in the 1980s**

The 1980s were characterized by huge militating forces against the provision of basic education to school aged children worldwide. Many developing countries like Nigeria were saddled with debt burdens, many were been threatened by economic stagnation, millions of children were dying of preventable diseases, and there were civil strifes, violent crimes, wars, HIV/AIDS, etc. (Bhana, D., Farook, Brixen F., MacNaughton, G & Zimmermann, R (2006). These problems had devastating effects on developing countries and prevented them from providing education for the school aged children. Among other things it was found out that more than 100 million children have no access to primary education, more than 100 million children and countless adults fail to complete basic education programs, and millions more satisfy the attendance requirements but do not acquire essential knowledge and skills (UNESCO, 2000). Nevertheless, in the 1990s the nations of the world spoke through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that everyone particularly children should have a right to education (Anna, 2001).

### **The Global Efforts to Support Early Childhood Care and Education**

The United Nations General Assembly was among the first world organizations to consider the child as very important and the need to protect and encourage the child's development and all its ramifications. Therefore, in 1989 at the convention on the Right of the Child, the UN General Assembly clearly stipulated the proper development of the child as the inalienable right of the child. Nations were urged to decide quite clearly and early what they intended to do with their young children. In the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, there is a strong indication that "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity needs special safeguards and care" (UNICEF, 1999). The Conventions on the Rights of the Child places special emphasis on the primary caring and protective responsibilities towards children because of their vulnerability and need for special care and protection.

Furthermore, in 1990, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, UNICEF, among others, organized a World Summit for Children at Jomtien as part of efforts to improve the quality of life of children and protect their rights. The highlights of the conference among others include

every person—child, youth and adult—shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs; ...the scope of basic education should be based on

an integrated system which includes the following components; Early childhood care and initial education, either through arrangements involving families, communities or institutional programs. (Bernard van Leer Foundation (1990) p 5.

The conference set the goal to be achieved by 2000. The follow-up was the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (2000) re-affirmed and extended the Jomtien commitment and early childhood education received greater attention and was made one of the six goals of Education For All (EFA) (World Education Forum, 2000). This same goal was reaffirmed again in that same year as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It was accepted as the key to sustainable development, social justice, and a brighter future. The highlights of the global trends of the 1990s include the following:

- Recognition that learning starts from birth
- There was a merger between early childhood care and education
- Concern with the care and education of the vulnerable children
- Concern for developmental continuity between early childhood education and subsequent education
- Finding ways to support services to improve family life

It was also emphasized that learning begins before a child walks through the classroom door. From the earliest age, children's development and learning should be fostered through their interactions with caring human beings in a secure, nurturing, stimulating environment (Third World Summit on Media for Children, 2004). Therefore, expanding and improving comprehensive ECCE is essential for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children (World Education Forum, 2000).

Nigeria as part of the participating nations signed a Declaration and Plan of Action at the Convention, which was ratified. As a follow up to the conventions, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) at its Heads of State Summit in Addis Ababa adopted a charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child. Other international bodies like the Bernard van Leer Foundation of the Netherlands, organizations like World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), and the National Association for the Education of Young children (NAEYC) have been making positive inputs into the campaign for ECCE for all children. The provision of early childhood services in Nigeria include day care centers, kindergartens, nurseries, rural community-based centers, rural market-based periodic centers, home-based, mobile centers and, church-based centers, (UNESCO, 2004).

## **Nigeria Efforts in Support of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**

Nigeria being a signatory to global efforts on the Rights of the Child has the mandate to implement the plea of action. In the bid to achieve the EFA and Millennium Development Goals for universalizing primary education by 2015, Nigeria has adopted various strategies to create fast-track access to basic education for all children (Federal Ministry of Education, 2006). Nigeria launched the Universal Basic Education Program (UBE) in 1999 and also passed into law the compulsory, free Basic Education Act in 2004. Moreover, the integration of ECCE into the UBE program through the UBE Law 2004 was a major catalytic action that led to increased national awareness of the importance of ECCE. The government directive to all public schools to establish pre-primary classes propelled a spectacular increase in the national demand for ECCE services nationwide (UNESCO, 2005; Federal Ministry of Education, 2006, 2007). In addition, the government set guidelines for the identification of gifted and vulnerable children in 2006 and formulated National Policy on Gender on Basic Education in 2007. These efforts are geared toward putting in place structures that cater to children. This brings early childhood education into the main stream of government policy and education. The implication of this cannot be far-fetched as it provides the political impetus for interventions and actions that will improve the well being of all Nigerian children (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007). The government has therefore adopted various strategies to pay close attention to the child's survival, growth, development, and learning. These concentrated efforts have been found to help early child development in the areas of health, physical mental, and social and emotional development. The convergence of all these aspects of childcare is referred to as Integrated Early Childhood Development (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council [NERDC], 2004).

However, in spite of these efforts, many Nigerian children of school age are still not in school. According to the EFA 2007 Monitoring Report, 77,000 children are not in school and one-third of these children are in India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Ethiopia (UNESCO, 2006). Nigeria is one of the countries with more than one quarter of the school age population still out of school. The revelation in the newly developed Roadmap for the Nigerian Education Sector disseminated by the Federal Ministry of Education to stakeholders on April 1, 2009, that only 2.02 million of the 22 million children in the early childhood age cohort have access to ECCE program nationwide, called for concern (Kolo, 2009). More than 5 million of these children are in a non-formal setting and may not enroll in a formal setting (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007). The basic learning and

living needs of these children are not addressed. More importantly the children are missing out in the scheme of educational planning of the government for these children (UNESCO, 2002). Therefore, the possibility of achieving the EFA Goal 1 of expanding ECCE services to all children, particularly the vulnerable and disadvantaged, by 2015 is a mirage unless urgent strategic actions are taken to improve planning, quality, and quantity of service delivery for ECCE.

### **Why Achieving the EFA Goal 1 Seems a Mirage in Nigeria**

The 21st century has witnessed a dramatic quantitative growth in primary and not in early childhood education in Nigeria. Beyond expanding educational accessibility, the federal government embarked on a mass education program to wipe out illiteracy throughout the federation. A viable UBE program, which was launched in 1999 by the civilian administration, was an ambitious educational program designed to stimulate and accelerate national development, political consciousness, and national integration (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2002). Some of the objectives of UBE include:

1. Developing in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotions;
2. The provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school- going age;
3. Reducing drastically the incidence of dropout from the formal school system through improved relevance, quality, and efficiency;
4. Catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or another, have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education; and,
5. Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communication, and life skills (UBE, 2002).

It is clearly evident from the above objectives that the government's emphases are on primary school age children, out of school children, and illiterate adults. Note that the objectives do not address the survival, development, and educational needs of children from birth to age 5 despite the fact that this level of education is one of the components of the program. Primary education is made compulsory by the program. This shows that government prioritizes primary education. The upsurge in demand for ECCE services has imposed a constraint on the supply side, particularly on learning places, supply of skilled teachers, and caregivers to deliver the new integrated curriculum in a child-friendly environment (Federal Ministry of Education, 2009).

Other militating factors of achieving early childhood care and education include the following:

***Inadequate Funding:***

Inadequate funding has been a fundamental problem of early childhood care and education. The federal government decided to share the responsibility among the federal, state, and local governments. The federal spends less 13% of the budgetary allocation on all levels of education. This is below the recommended 26% approved by the UN. Less than 10% of this goes to public primary education and only 2% goes to early childhood education programs. Closely related to this is the hidden cost of education in Nigeria which keeps many children away from the program. Many parents cannot afford the fees which the available centers are charging and could not buy the uniforms and the school materials needed to make children enjoy the provision of the program. The level of poverty in Nigeria is high and many people live below poverty level.

***Inadequacy of Infrastructure Facilities:***

Quite a number of school buildings are very old and not in good shape. In fact, many of them are dilapidated. Some have no roofs, windows, or doors. This problem is related to funding because infrastructural facilities can only be purchased with money, although the federal government is currently trying to put up a model building in some selected schools through State Primary Education Board (SPEB). The board can only build one model school per local government. There is inadequate furniture. Some schools have no good chairs and tables. Many school materials have been destroyed by termites because of lack of storage facilities. Therefore, the learning environment of the public school facilities is unfriendly because of poor and inadequate infrastructures (Oduolowu, 2001). The situation was worsened by the attitude and ignorance of the "still asleep and in-between" categories of parents who believe that since government proclaims that education is free, it should be absolutely free. They are therefore not ready to support the school in any form. Many parents have neglected the rich traditional indigenous education of the parents, extended family members, and the environment as the teacher of the children. The traditional patterns of child rearing and nurturing children have been eroded by modern education system. In other cases the pattern of modern life of living in a nuclear family setting with both parents working has left the child uncared for in terms of early education and training. In order to meet the high demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's promises and possibilities, Nigeria cannot afford



to neglect early childhood care and education which is a strong foundation for the subsequent levels.

### ***Instruction Materials:***

In respect of instructional material especially textbooks, Maduewesi (1999) notes that many of our early childhood facilities are in dire need of good quality and sound book materials in the form of readers, picture books, work books, and work sheets. Locally produced books in Nigeria lack quality and color. The materials used in their production are inferior, the colors are dull, and they are not prepared by professionals. Some schools import some books cheaply from places like China and Taiwan. Although these books contain lively pictures, culturally wrong impressions are being passed on to our children. Children at this level of development are dominantly governed by sense impression. In addition, many of the rhyme, songs, and stories used in Nigeria preschools are foreign. There is basically no attraction for children to be in the facilities that the government provided as existing public primary schools. Activities should be drawn up to reflect the Nigerian background since Nigeria is very rich in folklores and stories that depict our history, traditions, and practices. These activities that are locally based should be incorporated into the early childhood programs to make it relevant to the needs of the children in these other settings that seem to be marginalized.

### ***Accessibility:***

One of the major problems confronting early childhood education in Nigeria is accessibility. As it is stipulated in the policy on pre-primary education that government will encourage private efforts in the provision of this level of education, this pronouncement of government has created a vacuum. A majority of the existing early childhood education facilities are established by private entrepreneurs. There are few government preschools. Fees are being charged in the existing schools so this makes it impossible for many Nigerian children below the age of 6 have access to the provision. There is no universal early childhood program as you have it at the primary level. The existing pre-primary schools are accessible only to children from families that can afford it. Many parents in Nigeria are living below the poverty line. Unfortunately, more than one quarter of the school age population is still out of school.

Many of the children (about 5 million) between birth and 5 years who have no access to early childhood education are children in non-formal settings like the traditional Qu'ranic schools (Igbozor, 2006; Indibawa, 1992; Khan, 1985). The

parents ignorantly believed that Western education would pollute their wards, even though the traditional Qu'ranic schools are not stimulating, not very child-friendly, and have a harsh learning environment that is devoid of play for the children. Such learning environment cannot meet the nurturing, stimulation, and interaction needs of the children. The parents cannot also provide home schooling that can ensure the inculcation of the learning and living skills for these children's survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its promises and possibilities.

***Location:***

Many of the existing early childhood facilities are located in urban and commercial centers, peri-urban, and capital cities. The practitioners establish their schools in locations where they can make maximum profit. The cash flow and population density in rural areas do not support the venture of running preschools in rural areas. The implication of this is that there are very few or no pre-primary schools in rural areas. This means that children below the age of 6 living in rural areas have no access to early childhood facilities. It should be noted that the population of children below 6 years living in rural areas is enormous. The implication of this is the fact that a huge portion of children are not mainstreamed into the early childhood program in Nigeria. There is need for urgent action if the government wants to achieve the goal of providing education for all the children by 2015.

***Languages Issues:***

It is stipulated in the National Policy on Education that the medium of instruction at the pre-primary level of education should be the mother-tongue or language of immediate environment. It is clear that the practitioners are not implementing this policy and government is not enforcing it. Studies show that parents consider articulation in English as one of the reasons why they send their children to pre-primary schools. They believe that learning to speak in English early and fluently will aid their children's successes in learning outcomes.

The parents are not completely right because research results show that children learn better when they learn in their mother-tongue. Proprietors do not help matters because they enforce the use of English as a medium of instruction and also medium of communication in and out of class. In fact, some prohibit speaking in the language of the immediate community. The implication of this is the fact that many of these children have no strong conceptual basis in many of the school subjects even in the English language. Many enrolled children drop out after the third or fourth year in school because of lack of motivation and low

achievement in the basic learning skills. Some come out of school worse than illiterates. This makes many not appreciate the benefits of early childhood which go beyond reading and writing.

There are evidences that early childhood education prepares children to succeed in school, those who are exposed to the programs are found to become better citizens who commit less crime. They earn more wages, pay more taxes, and they are found to be less dependent on government for remedial and support programs. The money that government invests in quality ECCE now saves the society higher future costs.

### **Striking a Balance**

Nigeria, as one of the 164 countries that re-affirmed their commitments into the goals of Education For All (EFA), has no doubt put a lot of effort into achieving early childhood education for all her children. Unfortunately, the EFA Global Monitoring Report for 2008 indicates that Nigeria will still be on her way to achieving the goal even by 2025. This report was as a result of ranking of Nigeria in the 111th position of the EFA Report for 2008 and the fact that Nigeria is low on the Education For All Index (EDI), performing better than just 18 countries. Despite the achieving increase in enrollment, Nigeria is still recording low levels at most indicators. What then could be done since we are just halfway to 2015? There are still seven years ahead. Is our hope on hold?

Nigeria as a country is blessed with human and natural resources that can definitely be harnessed. Nigeria can put a stop to poor uses of the resources to achieve this goal of providing early childhood education for all her children by 2015. Explicit government intervention is inevitable in this case and higher spending on ECCE programs cannot be overemphasized as a result of the benefits the program will yield to the nation both at short and long term bases.

In addition, ECCE programs should have a top level political endorsement. It is not enough to incorporate it as just one of the components of UBE, it should also be made free, universal, and compulsory just as the primary education is. This should be properly integrated into the national development plans of the nation, and all the ECCE policies that government has been formulating should be properly coordinated by relevant government parastatals. Government efforts should also be geared towards the un-reached and those who are excluded from the program either as a result of ignorance or as a result of poverty and inability to support the children in a semi-formal setting. It may be difficult to provide home-based early childhood education for the un-reached and children living in rural areas because of the costs and the modalities of the operation of home-

based facilities, but government can embark on family care programs that can equip and empower parents to be able to provide and meet the basic needs of the children in terms of care and education. It may be a worthwhile effort to experiment with an open school system in order to capture the population of the un-reached children into the program.

In addition, the role of the parents in providing early childhood care and education cannot be underestimated. Today's Nigerian parents should learn from the past, the rich traditional and indigenous educational practices characterized by functionalism that met the needs of the youngsters in yester years. Although this may be inadequate to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century high demands of technological advancement, this could also form the springboard on which modern educational practices could be built. Nigeria has been blessed with a natural environment that is rich in instructional resources with which children can develop their latent potentials with the guidance of adults around them. The values of outdoor education if properly utilized will provide very rich opportunities for the children to development and acquire learning and living skills. There are trees, rivers, mountains, farmland, and other physical features which nature has endowed Nigeria particularly in the rural areas. These could form the backbone of the modern education system in Nigeria. Nevertheless there is need for the training and re-training of parents and the available adults in the children's environment to be able to maximally use the natural environment of the children to lay the foundation of further learning for the children. The early childhood best practices from other nations of the world such as the Reggio Emilia Early Childhood Education Approach could be a reference point.

### **Conclusion**

Today's children are the citizens of tomorrow's world. Children's survival, protection, development, and education are a prerequisite for the future development of the nation. Therefore, the progress of children through all the levels of education should be a key goal of overall national development. ECCE should therefore form an integral part of the broader national development. Investment in children's health, nutrition, and education is the foundation for a strong national development. Government and parents and all other stakeholders should support the early care and education of children. Waiting for the statutory school age of 6 before the children's care and education are taken seriously may be too late because by then according to research findings, the most brain wiring, language abilities, physical capabilities, and cognitive foundations have already been set. It is very important to note that investing in the whole child is a sure venture that will yield dividends that will pay off

throughout a child's entire life cycle.

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