

# **SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY STRONG EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE CHILDHOOD IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

*Learning is a synergistic process, resulting from the interplay between innate aptitude and environmental influences. This is also true for children, particularly when they are provided with environments that stimulate and support their growth and development. Early childhood education centres on learning experiences which children receive during their formative years, and it goes a long way to lay the foundation for their future success. The social and cultural environment in which children are raised plays an important role in the holistic development of young children, specifically in the acquisition of social skills and cultural norms. Most researchers have directed attention to early childhood education pedagogies, but there is a dearth of studies on the issue regarding the socially and culturally strong background of young children. Furthermore, few studies advocated the importance of equipping the adults who teach these theories and curricula in terms of interpreting children's learning process at different stages and how they may help them develop competence in their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Hence, the paper argued that in achieving socially and culturally strong early childhood education for sustainable childhood, efforts should be geared towards the delivery of appropriate adult education programmes such as family life education to parents and other caregivers, strengthening and empowering the family unit, and promoting well-articulated and implemented social policies towards the holistic development of children.*

**Key words:** adult education, childhood, cultural, family, social

## **Introduction**

Early experiences are important in shaping how successful children become later in life. These experiences are better acquired through early exposure of young children to qualitative early childhood education in the early years. This is because education plays a key role in providing individuals with the knowledge, skills and competences needed to participate effectively in society. It refers to any experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character, or physical ability of an individual. Education plays

a vital role in empowering women, safeguarding children from exploitative, hazardous labour and sexual exploitation (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, 2003). Education is often considered an important legacy that any parent could give a child. Ponczek and Souza (2012) stated that where parents find it difficult to give children quality education, it is considered to lead to a deficiency in the quality of such children. To this end, parents must be aware of appropriate early childhood education

programmes obtainable within the four walls of a school and outside the school environment.

While pointing to the fact that parents play a crucial role in young children's development, the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF (2013), asserts that early childhood development is a shared responsibility between parents and the caregivers whom they trust. Therefore, parents and caregivers working together on curricula and strategies will lead to the best results for children. A good foundation in the early years makes a difference through adulthood and even gives the next generation a better start (United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, 2013).

In Nigeria, early childhood education has received attention in recent times. The Universal Basic Education (UBE, 2004) made provision for every public primary school to have a pre-primary school, so that children could be prepared, ready, and early childhood education has also been included in the undergraduate curriculum of the Faculty of Education. There have also been sectoral interventions in the areas of the Child Rights Act, to name a few. Likewise, the National Policy on Education (NPC 2004), revised in 2013, made provision for early childhood education and also encourages private participation in the provision of pre-primary education. However, implementation of government policies at this level does not seem to be yielding the best results. This is because there is a proliferation of early childhood institutions, providing this education without many standards and regulations in terms of school environment (anything four walls could pass for a school), and many of such schools are not licensed. The quality and qualifications of teachers also raise concern; many of these teachers are undergraduates who lack the requisite

qualifications. There is also the problem of the teacher-pupil ratio and ineffective supervision.

Globally, delivery of early childhood education is not without its challenges. In Tanzania, early childhood education and care are still regarded as being unsatisfactory because there are no clear policies about their funding and management. It is yet to be taken as a priority; there were no clear policies on it before 2004, and also not a major priority in the Tanzanian Development vision of 2025 ([www.research gate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)). In the United States of America, early childhood education is not mandatory. The legal requirement is for students to be exposed to elementary and secondary school education

### **Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Childhood**

Early childhood education for sustainable development connotes that children are given age-appropriate education that would not only support their childhood, determine their later school success, but also help them grow into adults who will contribute meaningfully to their society at a later time. From the perspective of Elliott (2019), early childhood education for sustainability development is about transformative change at many levels of young children's thinking, ways of being, and ways of acting to regenerate the Earth. Many educators readily engage in the tangible aspects of early childhood education for sustainability in early childhood services for a better future for children. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2008) maintains that early childhood education is about laying a sound intellectual, psychological, emotional, social, and physical foundation; it has an enormous potential in fostering values,

attitudes, and skills that support sustainable development. This is an indication that exposing children to education at an early stage of their lives paves the way for their cognitive and overall development. Ericksen (2013) opines from an ecological point of view that children are more prone to develop positive environmental attitudes as adults, based on their early exposure to nature. This assertion may also be true for other areas of their life.

Sustainable early childhood education, whether formally or informally, implies that the teaching and learning process takes into consideration the characteristics of the learners at this stage, for their holistic development. This points to the reason why a useful internationally-ratified guiding document for *Sustainable Development* stated that *By 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development* (Elliott, 2019). Adult teachers, parents and family members and caregivers are deeply involved in the attainment of this goal.

In striving to achieve this, the unique qualities of children should be taken into consideration. For instance, children at the pre-school stage, according to Dorothy (2014), Omotuyole, Olowe, and John (2019), sometimes have difficulty verbalizing thoughts, respond with spontaneity, are curious, have varying attention spans, and learn by doing. They are easily distracted because of short attention span, have difficulty making decisions, they need active participation and are interested in the process of

doing. All these have implications for the adults who care for them, both within the home environment and at school.

Children at the pre-operational stage learn to develop their vocabulary. They are aware that every object has a name. More importantly, children at this stage are moral realists (Osarenren, 2002) because they learn of good and bad, appreciate rules and their consequences on behaviour, but lack the mental capacity to consider the motives for judging good and bad. Children in their early years also are fascinated with symbolization, although adults oftentimes forget the depth of such symbolization and the importance attached to same (Osarenren, 2002), children are also able to associate object with names in a manner that makes meaning to them, and they also begin to understand the difficult concept of classification, though only one dimension at a time.

Parents need to dedicate sufficient time to find out from their children what they do in school, and also discuss their experiences in school. Parents should also interact with their children's teachers for necessary updates on their children. Teachers, on the other hand, are expected to have the good disposition and temperament required to guide the children. An appropriate adult education programme in the form of family life education puts parents and caregivers in the right perspective about the growth and development of these children, and consequently, the age-appropriate education designed for children and such behaviour that may be expected of them. Unfortunately, in many homes, both parents are working and could hardly make out time to ensure this supervision, unlike in traditional times where the roles of both sexes are clearly defined and strictly adhered to.

Sustainable early childhood education includes, but is not limited to, religious education, physical and health education, art education, library programme, delivered in songs, through the print or electronic media or in the form of storytelling. Parents are expected to spend time with their children, visit places like the library, post offices, art gallery, museum, a zoo, aquarium, historical sites, parks, playgrounds, go to the movies, see a play, concert or other live shows and allow children to read for enjoyment. Peralta (2008) advocated that improving early childhood education in developing countries calls for consistency and synergy in the provision of the relevant aspects both in context and with the participation of all stakeholders, that is, the government, community, families, educators and the children.

The Government should play the role of supervision, promoting policies and programmes that make a positive impact on early childhood education. For instance, in a study to determine the correlation between socio-cultural factors and the quality of life of families with regard to access to education, Keshinro (2018) reported that the private schools were widely patronized over the public schools. However, the quality of education provided raises concern, especially in light of the parents' income level and the affordability of these services. Other concerns include the qualification of caregivers in such schools, as well as the environment in which learning takes place. The study found that the total monthly income of most adult respondents was within the 20,000 Naira range and below 50,000 Naira, which is lower than 140 Dollars per month. It raises a question of the quality of services provided and what is being paid for such services. This is of great concern and relevance to this

paper, and it emphasizes the need to ensure standards in this sector. It suggests that educators, especially the policy makers, in the educational sector need to give close monitoring to providers of educational services, especially the private partners, to ensure standards and to possibly address issues accounting for low patronage at the public schools where government supervision is expected to be optimal.

### **Social and Cultural Early Childhood Education**

Social and cultural early childhood education for sustainable childhood should aim at building the confidence and self-esteem of growing children as well as promoting the understanding of their cultural heritage. Each child interacts uniquely with the world around them, and what they invoke and receive from others and the environment also shapes how they think and behave. Children grow up in different cultures and receive specific inputs from their environment (Ching-Yu, 2018). During the early years, children discover who they are as they get socialized through their family members and significant others. Socially, children want to develop a positive relationship with adults. They like talking to adults, share ideas and love to interact with one or two classmates in a play situation. Children love to take a leadership role in activities, display self-confidence and are anxious to gain adult approval (Omotuyole, *et al.* 2019). This process of socialization, which begins early in life, is a lifelong process which must be properly executed and supervised. To be a part of the social construction takes involvement, commitment and motivation. Concerning children, this can consist of being trained as social beings; taking notice, expressing one's own thoughts, listening to

others, respecting others' opinions and others as fellow humans, cooperating, taking responsibility, reflecting and participating (Jutvik & Liepina, 2007). A good way of practicing these skills is participation in everyday activities, taking responsibility for, and taking part in planning processes and projects. Role play is a way of learning social skills and empathy.

The scholarly assertion informs the reason why adults need to integrate children into a socialization pattern that promotes their self-esteem and confidence positively. Effective childhood socialization is instrumental to children's high school achievement and optimal societal performance afterwards (Emery & Onwuemelie, 2019). Striking a balance between repressive socialization and participatory socialization calls for appropriate adult education, in the form of parenting and family life education. The right values and attitude should be inculcated in a corrective rather than punitive manner. Parents play a fundamental role in the socialization and discipline of their children (Osarenren, 2002).

It is well documented that when children come from warm homes, where their senses and intellect are stimulated, they tend to be mentally competent and become oriented towards mastery. Discipline should be done in love. Otherwise, children thereby learn to remain in their shells. This may be difficult to correct and may also affect their cognitive ability. It is worth noting that the bond that most adults expect from their children in later years is usually established during the children's early years. It is important, therefore, to lay the right foundation and ensure children learn through the right medium. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, n.d) posited that the standards for the development and education of young children

were created with input from experts and educators from around the world. Again, research suggests that adults who engage children in culturally responsive educational experiences help to build young children's self-confidence and skills; increase children's awareness, appreciation, and inclusion of diverse beliefs and cultures; and maximize children's academic achievement and educational success.

### **Role of The Family in Sustainable Early Childhood Education**

The home and indeed the family are a child's first platform for early childhood education. If the home front is good, early childhood education would be effective and sustainable. Efforts should therefore be made to remove all forms of inhibition to sustainable early childhood education within the family. The family is a basic social and economic unit; it is important because it has a great influence on the personality of individuals. It is the principal source of our sense of membership in any society, the source of the most meaningful forms of mutual giving and receiving of nurture and care. According to Bianchi and Casper (2000), the family remains an anchor for an individual's well-being, and it carries rich social and cultural meanings which have deep personal significance for most people. The family is a primary agent of cultural conditioning for children of any society (Alam, 2012). Therefore, what goes on within this institution, the form of marriage, procreation, and parental child-rearing practices, makes the family and society indispensable for continuity and, by extension, determines to a great extent the values held by individuals who power this continuity (Keshinro, 2018). Within the family, children develop fundamental routines and habits that contribute to physical health and well-being.

They are provided with the environment within which they acquire human values and morals, from generation to generation. This has great implications for the growth and development of children in their early years. Children in their early years observe their environment and learn. This is evident in how, occasionally, they try to act out some of the things their parents do. Adults should allow children to be expressive and should also create fun out of their activities. Children need care and nurture to grow into confident adults. Consequently, they should be well fed and provided with opportunities to learn. Any form of pressure may repress these opportunities.

One of the ways to remove pressure and promote opportunities to learn is to observe the family unit. The family is that institution in society which is most vulnerable to, and influenced by, changes in other institutions (Palriwala, 1994). These changes manifest in the form of challenges such as unemployment, housing problems, growing urbanization and poverty, to name a few. These changes, no doubt, affect the family and its members and may put a lot of stress on the unit as a whole. The ripple effect can be enormous on the family, and children often times, are most vulnerable in these situations.

Torres (2008) submitted that two main sources of discrimination result from being a child and being poor. The scholar considers it a bad combination in our societies in that it not only affects the socio-economic status but also the age of individuals concerned, and to a great extent, how they are treated. Achieving socially and culturally strong early childhood education for sustainable development suggests that the family should be strong and empowered in terms of available resources, and it is strongly advocated

that the size of the family should support access to basic needs. Otherwise, access to and quality of early childhood education may be impacted and may also make learning difficult for growing children. Ponczek and Souza (2012) presented this as a trade-off which exists between the quantity and quality of children.

Many children have been denied access to early childhood education as a result of poverty because the family size and available resources have not supported a basic standard of living (Ponczek & Souza, 2012; Hyeladi, Alfred, & Gyang, 2014). Nigeria, as a nation, is the sixth most populous country in the world, and the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa. The country is said to have one of the fastest population growth rates in the world, perhaps because fertility rate and family size still appear high among many communities, with the corresponding effect of low access to education, high number of out-of-school children, increased child labour and threatened future development (National Population Commission, NPC, 2014).

The implications of the size of the family and early childhood education can be viewed from many perspectives. Arthur (2006) asserted that parents in large families cannot interact as closely with their children as those in smaller families. Consequently, there is less opportunity for adequate protection, strict discipline, or close supervision of children. This may be linked with anti-social behaviour and delinquency in later years, lower self-esteem and academic achievement of children from large families. In such families, the physical and mental health of the mother who functions as the primary family welfare provider may likely suffer (Alam, 2012; Bakare, 2013). The temperament of such parents may not promote an atmosphere that stimulates

the positive development of the children. In contrast, children from small families are more likely to enjoy spending time with their parents and learn better informally since they can be assured of their parents' undivided attention. In most cases, such parents can monitor their children, give prompt attention and may also go to the extent of helping their children with their homework. This would have a positive impact on the development of such children. The contribution of a smaller family size to sustainable childhood and development, generally, is immense. The World Bank in 2000 asserted that it extends beyond the immediate family to the community at large.

### Conclusion

The attitudes and expectations of parents, particularly mothers, are highly influential in childhood education. Evidence abounds on the close relationship between child development and adult education, and between children's education and that of their parents. Torres (2008) submitted that child development and adult education are complementary and mutually dependent. To this end, it is imperative to establish that when adults are well informed, they can guide children aright and help their developmental processes positively. In the same vein, the family of each child is indispensable if young children are to develop socially and acquire acceptable norms and values of society.

### Recommendations

The arguments of the paper necessitated the following recommendations:

1. The Federal government should make an effort towards the delivery of appropriate adult education programmes to parents and guardians who play a significant role

in the inculcation of social skills and instill appropriate societal norms and values in young children during the early years.

2. Sensitization programmes that will better inform the parents on the significance of social development and norms should be incorporated into the school programmes and carried out periodically to equip parents and guardians, during open day programmes or when the need arises.

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