

# Early Childhood Education and Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** *As we open the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with almost three years spent in it the garment of fear of manipulation of all types of technologies which many parents, caregivers and school administrators, are putting on should be torn. The need to study the child and its major characteristics, the need for adequate school facilities such as playground equipment, the need to recruit only the professionally qualified caregivers to handle children and the pre-schools and the need for a developed information and libraries service amongst other should be the priority of all stakeholders in the 21st century. It is against this background that Early childhood Education and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been chosen as the focus of this paper. The paper is descriptive analysis of problem areas in early childhood education and suggestions that can be implemented to reduce the challenges.*

**Keywords:** Caregiver, Stakeholder, Early childhood education, 21st century, Communication, Stimulation.

## Introduction

At the end of every century and the beginning of a new one, there is always a great expectation in the minds of many for positive changes and rapid transformation of the human society. No doubts too, these expected positive changes towards the improvement of quality of life and increased chances of survival can only be guaranteed by quality and functional early childhood education in our schools at the period of such transition. It is therefore instructive and imperative to state at this junction that early childhood education if well invested in, is the bed rock to further educational system of any country. If well implemented, it covers the aspects of a child's life such as infant stimulation, health and nutrition, early childhood education, physical development, socialization and intellectual development among others (UBEC, 2013). It is deliberately targeted at effecting developmental changes in the child.

A brief explanation of early childhood education becomes imperative at this juncture so as to help understand what it means and its importance to the general being of the children and how the challenges facing its implementation can be tackled.

Early childhood, in general, refers to a child's life from conception until age eight (8), however, in Nigeria, it is the period between 0-5 years. These years are critical to the holistic development of the child. The development of the child during this period is accompanied by the structuring of neural connections in the brain, physical growth in the general body, personality development and socio-emotional skills. Most significantly, the experiences of a child in transition to primary education are critical because what is learnt prior to primary school needs to be sustained for the child to do well in later life. (UBEC, 2013).

## Early Childhood education

Children are our common future. It is important that appropriate care and development of children is given utmost attention so that they will grow well and become responsible adults. This type of education is backed up with laws, protocols, declarations, bills that started at Jomtien Declaration of 1990 which states that, "*Learning begins at birth*" and early childhood care and development and education (ECCDE) was recognized as part of Basic education. (UBE Act 2004).

The quality of care and education children receive at this level determines the quality of life they will have in the new century and later years.

In the past, the term "early childhood education" has been used to describe a range of academic programs. This variety includes – pre-primary education, nursery school, pre-school, kindergarten, day care and child care, just to name a few (Harry 2011). The transition from a life sheltered within a family to one of daily classroom activities with others is one of the most critical steps in our lives as young children. Examining the various descriptions of the concept early childhood education will help understand what it covers.

Infant stimulation, health and nutrition, early childhood education, physical development, socializing, and intellectual development are just a few of the areas covered by early childhood care development and education.

According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2013), ECCDE is the care, protection, stimulation, and learning fostered in children from birth to age four in a nursery or creche, as well as the year of education provided to children from age five until they join primary school (pp 18-20).

Oduolowu (2011) views the concept as the sum of birth to toddlerhood (0 – 24 months) and play years (2 – 6 years).

Awoniyi (1985) opines that early childhood means the educational provisions, formal as well as informal that are available for children from age zero to six years.

Oduolowu (2006) sees it as a unique branch of knowledge (field) which includes the essential components of all family and programme arrangements for young children from birth to the statutory school age of six.

Before the age of formal school, which in Nigeria begins at the age of six, Maduwesi (1999) describes it as an academic curriculum for young children.

Osanyin (2002) refers to group settings for children between the ages of approximately 0-8 years.

Fowowe (2010) sees the concept as all activities targeted at promotion of the holistic development of children following individually, developmentally and culturally appropriate practices. Based on the description above, it becomes imperative for anyone who wants to take care or educate the child, to have the capacity to understand or describe the child. To therefore satisfactorily describe a child, we must be able to look at eight (8) different perspectives as espoused by Anero (2018)

1. **Philosophical perspective:** Philosophically speaking, the child is someone who cannot engage or be engaged in abstract thinking or activity. This justifies the use of concrete materials in teaching children. The use of materials to enhance learning for the child was stressed by many childhood experts; among whom is Maria Montessori.
2. **Psychological perspective:** Psychologically speaking, the child is one undergoing growth and development. This is to say that the child experience increase in size in terms of weight, height and functioning of the body organs. To enhance proper growth, development and functioning of the child, all children educators must ensure that the child is trained in a good environment with emphasis on balanced diet.
3. **Age perspective:** A child is typically defined as a person who is under the age of 18. With his age hypothesis, Piaget successfully established that a child's capacity for cognitive tasks is predetermined by their age. He classified the child's intellectual growth according to age on the basis of this. According to Piaget's theory, an individual's abilities are determined in part by their age.
4. **Social perspective:** Socially speaking, a child is one undergoing the acquisition of social skills in terms of morals and values of the society. This belief justifies why many socializing agencies target the child's proper socialization. Some such agencies are school, church, mass media, peer group among others. The failure of the agencies in effectively socializing the child account for most of the antisocial behaviours prevalent among children. Some such behaviours are: disrespect to parents, elders, teachers and those in authority, show of dishonesty, lying, disobedience to laid down rules and regulations, fighting, lateness to set times, loitering, examination malpractice, stealing and many more.
5. **Economic perspective:** Economically, the child is an economic dependent. He/she depends on those around for his needs. Unfortunately some societies like the Almajiri people use children to fend for others. Some others use them exploitatively as house helps, hawkers, farmers, soldiers and many more. The view that they need to be fended for prompts the society to have negative look at those who use them for economic gains. Early use of children for hawking and other economic exploitation tendencies obstructs them from attaining the expected developmental milestones in all developmental ramifications.
6. **Political perspective:** A child cannot vote or be voted for politically; this is a key obstacle to using a youngster in an electoral process. A child cannot develop political autonomy. No one may vote for or on behalf of the child. In most nations, using children as voters is viewed as being unfair to the election process. When it is uncovered, it typically results in the revocation of election results. This conduct can be linked to the fact that children lack the ability to reason abstractly and may not be able to explain why they vote for certain candidates or don't vote for certain candidates.
7. **Legal perspective:** Legally, the child cannot sue or be sued in a court of law. The reason being that the child is considered to be undergoing development in all ramifications. The child is known for undergoing the acquisition of social skills (morals and values) and it is not in dispute that the child's thinking process is considered to be under developed such that, it hasn't the capacity to distinguish between right from wrong. Based on this, it becomes out of place to engage such a person in a legal exercise which naturally demands logic and other forms of abstract intellectual meditation and exercise.
8. **Societal perspective:** Different societies perceive who is a child differently. In some African communities, a man of 50 years is still considered a child to his parents who may be 75 years or his elders whose age brackets are above his chronological age. They may wish to exercise the influence they wielded on the individual when he/she was within the early and middle childhood. This is not the same in the Western communities where attainment of 18 years qualifies the individual to be autonomous in all aspects of life.

### **The 21st Century Demands and what Learning Early Childhood Education offers Children**

A person saddled with the training of children is a caregiver. A caregiver therefore is not just any teacher, he/she must be specially trained in child stimulation, care and early learning. The person must be interested in working to help children achieve their full potentials: physically, socially, intellectually, morally and aesthetically. A caregiver is not just a teacher like those handling primary school pupils, he/she is professionally trained to understand the language and every disposition of children. The specialized role of a caregiver is so demanding and must be learnt (Fowowe and Melekeowei, 2017).

The major Characteristics of caregiver are itemized thus:

1. **Must be a true believer:** That means, must be passionate about helping kids/children and making a difference in the lives.
  2. **Someone with a heart:** Preschoolers need a lot of warmth and understanding. If you have to choose between qualitative and heart, go with heart every time. A teacher with an interested heart will acquired the needed qualification.
  3. **Provider of care and be patient:** Preschoolers are not expected to always sit, lots of patience and observation is required to identify their needs, potentials and challenges.
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4. **Be tolerant:** Each child is a little different. And they require individual attention. Yet none must be discriminated against.
5. **Be perseverant and Inventive:** They must get the job done even if it means coming up with a new way to do it.
6. **Be Realistic:** Not every problem has an immediate solution especially when it comes to children. Must always come up with solution by seeking more knowledge.
7. **Be honest:** If there is a problem, being ignorant and avoiding it is the worst course of action. Opening lines of communication with parents and colleagues is critical even when the parents seem not to be available.
8. **Be organized:** Children like predictable routine and for the most part, their parents do too. Especially when it comes to teacher's reports and conferences.
9. **Be Tidy:** The smaller the children, the more important it is to keep their play area clean and save.
10. **He/she must laugh and smile at all times:** A sense of humour is a huge assets (sometimes the only asset) that can help get through a day, with a fussy preschooler  
The needs of the children must be met before their potentials can be annexed.  
Ogunyiriofo (2006) identified some needs of the children that can be met before they can enjoy the 21st century.
1. **Basic needs:** These include food, shelter, clothing, rest or sleep and education.
2. **Independence:** A child today will grow into adolescence and later adulthood, it becomes necessary to prepare the child from the pre-primary level of education for the future challenge of being independent.
3. **Security:** The child needs security from danger.
4. **Intellectual needs:** Children's mental horizon needs to expand as they grow. This need must be met.
5. **Self control or discipline:** This should be professionally done and should avoid cane by all means.
6. **Love as need:** Love is considered a need for the child, parents, teachers and neighbours.
7. **Need for power:** Children should be allowed to do certain things, especially if it comes from them.
8. **Praise, respect and recognition:** The child needs to be praised or congratulated on every successful task the child undertakes.
9. **Social needs:** Children should be encouraged to interact with other kids.
10. **Toileting:** Children should be trained on toilet ethics.
11. **Nap or rest time:** Children need a short rest or nap for about half hour daily.
12. **Need for developing large and fine muscles.**
13. **Need for physical exercise:** Physical activity is important in order to avoid childhood obesity and the likes.
14. **General hygiene and personal practice:** A well established regime of basic hygienic practice should be part of the routine of a pre-primary school child.

The children of the twenty-first century are vastly different from those of the preceding centuries. Their requirements during earlier centuries. Before the 4Cs can function effectively in the twenty-first century, their needs of creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration must be satisfied. The education system has changed significantly over the past century, moving away from conventional teaching approaches and toward more contemporary ones. With this new strategy, the emphasis is on empowering kids with the coping mechanisms they'll need to thrive in a global market. The brain of the 21st century children is likened to a digital computer and for their handlers to be able to make them learn and obey you, you must reason with them as mature minds. Make them see reasons why a thing is either good or bad for them and watch them make the right decisions with you guiding them.

The 21st century equips children to thrive in the classroom and the world beyond. The life skills such as flexibility, initiative, social skills, productivity and leadership must be learnt right from their early life (Early childhood education).

#### **Benefits if Early Childhood Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Oduolowu (2011) describes this type of education as one that is fundamental to a child's overall development and that the later educational achievements and the future success greatly lie on the foundation given at this level. Specifically speaking, the High Scope pre-school study documented the benefits of early childhood education as captured in Oduolowu (2011) as follows:

- Better order high thinking and attention skills;
- Better reading, writing and mathematical abilities;
- Better social skills;
- Better ability to handle the demands of formal schooling;
- Dealing with deficits in children who need more help;
- Fewer special education placements;
- Less grade retention;
- High graduation rates;
- Preparing children to succeed in life;
- More economic productivity later in life;
- Less societal disengagement;
- Less dependency on welfare later in life;

- Higher sense of social stability in life;
- Improving socialization;
- Inculcation of healthy habits;
- Stimulation of creative learning processes;
- Enhanced scope for overall personality development;
- Decrease grade repetition;
- Future family stability;
- Increased future earnings, etc.

### Major Striking Characteristics of 21st Century Pre-Primary Children

A preschooler is a remarkable human being with a lot of potential. Just as a seed carries all of the genetic information for a mature plant, a kid bears the whole capacity for mature maturity. They were formed with the natural potential to reflect God's glory and to have a good soul. A child is meant to grow up and reflect God in their actions (Oduolowu, 2022). The combination of a child's nature and education can either harm or benefit the child. When the child is not taught according to his/her nature, it is like cutting the grain, dulling the knife and marring the wood. Parents as the first teacher and later caregiver, must understand the nature of a child so that teaching and stimulation can harmonize with that nature and cultivate him/her into a virtuous and flourishing adults.

It is important to state that, a child's mind is free to create whatever he/she desires and a child often sees creative solutions to complex problems. Children naturally love learning because they are naturally inquisitive. A child finds wonders and excitement in discovery. A child seems thrilled about learning and has a natural appetite for learning. Learning is embedded in education and therefore, education is so important to the child. Education is not just about learning a collection of stuffing education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, helps the child to develop self-dependency. It helps build confidence, fulfils dreams and ambitious and underpins human progress (Ibid 4).

With appropriate and relevant education, the child starts off as a child and gradually grows to be a proper adult fit for the larger society. It is against this background that the following major striking characteristics of pre-primary children are highlighted:

1. **Deferred Imitation:** The child imitates, as closely as he/she can, actions they have seen before. For example, a child feeding a doll the same way and doing and saying the same things that his/her mother did as she fed the baby the day before.
2. **Symbolic Play:** This little toddler plays pretend and employs symbols from the actual world. This contains elements of the child's feelings about their reality in addition to their imagination.
3. **Drawing:** The child does not just scribble anymore. They draw recognizable pictures. They attempt to represent objects or people from their world in their drawing. However, the child's art world is not visually accurate. It is how the child thinks.
4. **Menial Images:** The child can pull images from his/her memory about past experience.
5. **Language:** The youngster must be able to recognize an object or person when it is named in his or her thoughts and must be able to recognize an object or person when they see it.
6. **Transition from home to school:** The child's transition from home to school at this age may not be cordial, depending on the child's level of stimulation at home. So caregivers should expect nostalgia from the children.
7. **Limited Vocabulary:** The pre-primary school child cannot engage in conversation as the adult does, because of its limited vocabulary. However, children who are often spoken to by adolescents are more likely to improve in their communication skill.
8. **Organs of the pre-primary child:** Most of the organs of the child at this level are not well developed. Any child may feel like excreting or urinating at any moment. Once the teacher notices any unusual sign of discomfort of the child, the teacher should quickly approach the child to find out whether the child wants to ease itself or not.
9. **Mob response:** When a child indicates interest to go out and urinate, other children or even the entire class may also indicate interest to go and urinate. They tend to do this in mob.
10. **Attention Span:** Children are not used to sitting still in a place for a long time. They cannot also concentrate on any activity for more than 25 – 35 minutes. The teacher should carry out each school activity and programme within a short time interval.
11. **Playful Age:** Children have limited vocabulary, therefore, they get much of what they want by physical action rather than verbal means they engages in pushing stools, chairs, wheels, etc.
12. **Abhors Competitions:** Teachers should not declare any child as the best in any activity. Competition tends to destroy the cordial relationship that should develop among the children.
13. **Curiosity and Questioning:** As from the age of four, the pre-primary school child is interested in asking questions. Parents and teachers should consider the child's question as an important aspect of the child's intellectual development and upbringing.

### Challenges of the Twenty-First Century

As we enter the third year in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the garment of doubt, fear which many caregivers, teachers and educational administrators are putting on should be torn. The excuses of not knowing how to handle children, non-availability

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of books to read on early childhood education etc is no longer accepted and they are counter productive to the development of a just and 21<sup>st</sup> century society. There is a dire need to study the child, the need to commodify early childhood education in Nigeria, the need for adequate school/playground equipment and the need for a developed information and library services for all stakeholders.

- **The need to study the child:** The rise of social vices and aberrant behaviors among Nigerian children makes it necessary that we study children in this century. The children display some of the flaws and shortcomings of the society in which they were born, as well as some of the parents' concerns. Child study must be started in order to provide the developing youngster with the right supervision and beneficial help so that they can make a significant and good contribution to this century.
- **The need for adequate school facilities:** The school attend to the development of the child's personality and character through their social life, games, participation in drama, music and the visual arts, religion observances and other kinds of out-of-class activities. Apart from the financial implication, the human and material resources must be provided for. The era of alternatives to practical should be reviewed. We can no longer talk about early childhood classes without modern and age-appropriate play equipment and professional caregivers. The government at all levels and parents must be prepared to meet the challenges of this century (Ajetumobi, 2020).
- **The need for a developed information and Library Services:** Information is a necessary resource for the development of all aspects of human life. Teachers and caregivers at all levels need to be computer literate for effective communication and accumulation of useful ideas and ideals. More libraries, books and library staff are needed in our pre-schools for the intellectual growth of the society. There is also the need for every pre-school to have a full-time guidance and counselling services in schools. Such services will assist the learners between the childhood and adolescence age in resolving some of the crises of early life and help them to be able to adjust and take good decisions.

Equally, Aguh cited in Anero (2018) identified some of the challenges of early childhood education in Nigeria as follows:

- (i) A growing interest in early childhood education. The significance of early childhood education in Nigeria is acknowledged by the national policy on education. According to the National Policy on Education, the proliferation of early childhood is an important issue that has resulted in low standards and improper control of early childhood institutions across the nation.
- (ii) Corruption. In Nigeria, corruption is viewed as a destructive worm that wreaks havoc on the educational system. One of the reasons why the Universal Primary Education program in 1977 failed was corruption.
- (iii) Lack of competent and unqualified teachers and caregivers. Teachers and caregivers that are capable and skilled help children to be more eager and prepared to study. Early childhood teachers are required by NAEYC to have a thorough understanding of DAP in order to properly educate young children. Most early childhood centers in Nigeria are administered by untrained teachers who are unable to effectively educate and transfer knowledge.
- (iv) Inadequate Monitoring and Supervision. Another barrier to early schooling in Nigeria is considered to be insufficient monitoring and supervision. According to a report, early children centers must be adequately supervised and monitored in order to regularly administer early childhood programs (see <http://cess.unobi.ac.ke/sites/default/files/cees/final%20final%20pdf.pdf>).
- (v) Inadequate infrastructure facilities in the classroom. The enrollment of children in schools is hampered by inadequate infrastructure facilities for early childhood education. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1750> for early childhood
- (vi) Insensitivity of Nigerian Government to Early Childhood Education. Early childhood education's importance was overlooked by the Federal Government of Nigeria because it wasn't included in the National Policy on Education until 2004, 2013, and 2014.
- (vii) Poor Funding. One of the main issues in early childhood education has been a lack of finance. According to Jacob and Samuel (2020), funding for early childhood education was insufficient from 1999 through 2014, with the one-year kindergarten program only being introduced in 2013 and incorporated into the National Policy on Education's sixth edition and 2004 UBE ACT with a budgetary allocation of less than 12% for each fiscal year.

### Suggestions

The local, state and federal governments as well as, stakeholders in the business of early childhood education should continue to finance researches on problem areas in the education sector.

The educators in the tertiary institutions should be made to publish their research findings and those of their graduates, they found worthy of government and public knowledge.

- Teachers and caregivers especially, should be sufficiently motivated to love and appreciate their calling and bias in life, and to want to stay on the job.
- The personality of the learners should not be abused by the handlers nor by the parents. They should be loved and help to develop into full blown potentials. According to Ajetumobi (2020), the focus of this century is not to 'spare the rod and spilt the child' but spare the rod and educate the child in a modern way.
- The adult population needs to be morally upright in all their dealings. In government policy implementation, there is the need to be fair to all learners. The social demand of education must be considered as succinctly put by Vaizey et al (1966) quoted in Ajetumobi (2020) Any sort of school must admit any person who is suitably qualified, and it is the duty of any suitable government authority to foresee his request so that the school's capacity will be sufficient to accommodate him.

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