



PREPARING EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTITIONERS TO ENHANCE HIGH QUALITY FOR GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria as a nation is faced with the challenges of competing with the global world. Education which is recognized as the instrument for national development is been plagued with low quality practitioners. To address this problem, the early education which is the foundation and the bedrock of all education should be better taken care of. Among others, preparation of highly qualified teachers of Early Childhood Education is critical to the success of long term success of Nigeria. All educators, particularly early childhood educators should be better prepared to produce a workforce that can compete with the global market. Competing globally demands that we have a crop of highly prepared child educators who are capable of meeting the changing lifelong education needs. To this end, this paper discussed standards and strategies that can promote high quality in the preparation of practitioners in the field of Early Childhood Education so as to produce creative and innovative thinkers who will lead us to new economies and opportunities in the global market.

Keywords: Early Childhood Practitioners, education, early childhood care, child learning

INTRODUCTION

Survival is obviously unfeasible in a nation that does not recognize the importance of education. The World Economic Forum in its *Global Competitiveness Report* underlined that "Education and training have emerged as key drivers of competitiveness and so for economic competitiveness, education matters. The early years are important in building a strong foundation for life-long learning. A child's early experience can have a long lasting effect on his or her future competence and achievements as an adult. As noted by Naudeau et al. (2011) the skills developed in early childhood form the basis for future learning and labour market success, making early childhood a critical time of human capital accumulation. Early Childhood Care and Education is one of the most powerful weapons known for reducing poverty and inequality in modern societies. (Goodnight, 2000; Akinbote 2007). Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) see ECCE as a major contributor to breaking poverty cycles (Naudeau et al., 2011 UNESCO, 2011)

Research confirms that the impact of early childhood experiences in general is complemented by the efforts of competent, countless and dedicated early childhood educators hence, the need for high quality practitioners in the field. (CECEC, 2012; Akinbote, 2007). Also, the need for quality early childhood education practitioners becomes imperative because there is a growing recognition of the need to systematically improve the quality of early care and education. The popular quotation from National policy of Education is that 'No education can rise above the qualities of its teachers. (NPE, 2004). This is further emphasized by Dike (2006) when he submitted that the state of education in any society is a combination of many factors, including the resources committed to the educational sector and the quality of personnel assigned to manage the system. The quality of personnel assigned to manage early childhood education to a large extent determines its ability to fulfilling its role in education for global competitiveness.

High quality is described in terms of teacher's behaviours and relationships that are correlated with a positive impact on children's development and learning. The emphasis on high quality describes the knowledge, skills and disposition that child educators in training or those who are already working in the profession should have. In our crave for productivity and strive for global competitiveness the teacher preparation programme of early childhood practitioner should move away from so-called "input-based" criteria for quality toward output- or results-based criteria, such as knowledge or skills demonstrated by graduating students.

The ECE practitioners include everyone responsible for the care and education of young children. Example include child minders, nannies, helpers, day care staff, nursery workers early childhood teachers, programme director, education coordinators and curriculum specialists. In specifying the knowledge, skills and disposition that contribute to high quality education, having a degree or certificate that cannot meet the standard we about to present in this paper is a total waste. Teacher's ability to influence children's development and learning in a positive way is more critical than just certificate. The quality of the higher education programme that prepares new practitioners in the field to promote the development of skilful, knowledgeable child educators and administrators who are competent and committed to making high-quality early care and education services available to all young children and their families is urgently advocated for to enable the country compete in the global market.

Competing globally demands that we have a crop of highly prepared child educators who are capable of meeting the changing lifelong education needs. There is need to prepare early childhood practitioners that will produce creative and innovative thinkers who will lead us to new economies and opportunities in the global market. This is well confirmed in the words of Dike (2006) where he said that the quality of education and level of educational attainment of the people determine the quality of its leaders, the pace of economic development and the nation's global competitiveness. Akinbote (2007) noted the importance of the quality of teachers who are to ensure the realization of the aspirations we hold for our children matter. Therefore, to be able to face challenges of a changing world in this era of global competition, the preparation of early childhood education practitioners should be taken more seriously.

Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation

Ajayi (2004) noted that the performance of any teacher is a function of the background education which he is equipped with. The type of training a teacher receives is therefore a major factor in determining the quality of that teacher. To ensure quality there should be guidelines or standards that will spell out components of the specialized knowledge base for early childhood teachers in training. Standards provide one approach to defining and assessing quality in early childhood teacher preparation. These standards should be strictly followed for teacher preparation programmes for ECE practitioners. For example professional organisations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) and National Council for

Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have developed these standards. The NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation issued by NAEYC and NCATE (NAEYC, 2001) include these five categories:

- Promoting child development and learning
- Building family and community relationship
- Observing, documenting, and assessing to support young children families
- Teaching and learning
- Becoming a professional.

Promoting Child Development and Learning

The practice of early care and education is informed and guided by theory and research on human growth and development. Therefore, the preparation of early childhood education practitioners should include knowledge about child development and learning. This will enable them to know and understand young children's characteristics and needs, the multiple influences on development and learning. It will also equip them with developmental knowledge that they need to create healthy, respectful, support, and challenging returning environments.

Building Family and Community Relations

Early childhood practitioners' reciprocal relationships with families are crucial to building relationships with children. The practitioners should acknowledge that children develop in the context of families and communities and that building relationships with families is an integral part of competent and professional early childhood practice (CECEC, 2012). Their training should furnish them with the knowledge and understanding of diverse family and community characteristics. They should be supporting and engaging families and communities through respectful reciprocal relationships and also involve families and communities in their children's development and learning developmentally appropriate teaching/learning approaches.

Observing, Documenting, and Assessing to Support Young children and Families

Early childhood practitioners should be prepared with good knowledge in observation, screening and assessment. They are important tools for understanding children individually and in groups, and for the purpose of planning environments, curriculum and other learning experiences. Through these the childhood educators will have understanding of the goals, benefits, and uses of assessment; know about and using observation, documentation, and other appropriate assessment tools and approaches. These will enable them to understand and practice responsible assessment to promote positive outcomes for each child.

Using Developmentally Effective Approaches to Connect with Children and Families

Preparation of Early Childhood practitioners should also contain understanding of positive relationships and supportive interactions as the foundation of their work with children. This may involve the following:

- Knowing and understanding effective strategies and tools for early education.
- Using a broad repertoire of developmentally appropriate teaching/learning approaches.
- Reflecting on their own practice to promote positive outcomes for each child.

Using Content Knowledge to Build Meaningful Curriculum

ECE practitioners should have understanding of and use content knowledge and resources in academic disciplines to build meaningful curriculum. This may include:

- Knowing and using the central concepts, inquiry tools, and structures of content areas or academic discipline.
- Using their own knowledge, appropriate early learning standards, and other resources to design, implement, and evaluate meaningful, challenging curricula for each child.

Becoming a Professional

Children benefit from high-quality experiences and environments in the context of secure relationships with capable, educated professionals (CECEC, 2012). A practitioner should see himself/herself as a professional and his/her work as a professional practice by identifying and involving him/herself with the early childhood field, knowing about and upholding ethical standards and other professional guidelines. Also the practitioner should engage in continuous, collaborative learning to informed practice, integrating knowledgeable, reflective, and critical perspectives on early education and engaging in informed advocacy for children and the profession.

Other Strategies that can Enhance High Quality Practitioners in Early Childhood Education

Equipping them with quality and contemporary curriculum

There is need to equip child educators in training with a curriculum that supports the need of children and developmentally appropriate practice. Some of the courses offered by our institutions that prepare child educators are obsolete and needed to be reviewed to meet up with the challenges of producing competent personnel.

Giving them access to new knowledge

Early childhood practitioners should be committed to on-going learning. Becoming a high quality practitioner involves continual building of one's knowledge or skill and disposition. We should ensure that they have access to new knowledge through regular training, workshop in new methods and processes.

Building them to become intentional teachers

Professional intentional teachers exhibit some qualities or characteristics that tell us they are purposeful. They are caring and committed, considering children's needs and interest before their own. They are enthusiastic and energetically involved in children's activity. They genuinely enjoy being with young children. All these are virtues that should be built into teachers in training.

Encouraging Effective Practical Teaching and Clinical Practices

Practitioners' training programme should include more of practical and field work. This provides them with opportunity to develop observational skills and competencies needed in the field rather than focusing on classroom teaching. Clinical practices in ECE provide hands on experiences for teachers in training and also aid the use of authentic assessment in the early childhood classrooms. Mentoring of teachers during clinical practices also enables the trainees to imitate and eventually imbibe good practices in child care delivery.

Understanding of the use of modern technologies

If we are to remain relevant to the global world, early childhood practitioners should be exposed to the latest technologies. They should be trained to use computers effectively to teach, solve problems and be taught how to navigate the web and use internet resources and services. Children learn well in a computer- assisted learning environment. It aids learning in a variety of ways so the practitioners should be vast in the use of the modern technologies to be relevant and support children's learning.

Inculcating in them the culture of reflective practice

The ECE practitioners should be taught the act of reflective practice. This is essential for them to study their own teaching methods and determine what works best for the children. Through this they will be self aware, recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. Reflection also makes it possible for practitioners to compare their performance with other professionals to ensure a standard of excellence.

CONCLUSION

It is commonly and often said that education is used for laying the foundation for a sustainable growth and development of any nation. This can only be achievable when the personnel involved in carrying out the business of education are competent to deliver as expected of them. How teachers are prepared is a critical indicator of their competence, quality and the quality of the nation's education. More importantly, the competence of child educators is central to the education of children. Their responsiveness to the social, emotional and physical needs of young children has a profound influence on the children's development and learning. For us as a nation to compete in global market; our produce cannot be deficient in key skills critical for job performance. Whatever the current status of early childhood teacher education programmes, the potential for improvement is always present, we should improve on our programme quality. Specifically, we should endeavour to prepare teachers that will influence children's positive development and learning. Nobody can give out more than what he/she possesses. A high quality practitioner must be knowledgeable about child development, skilful at observing and assessing learning, intentional in planning experiences and environments that support children exploration, play and learning. ECE plays a critical role in laying the solid foundation for a sustainable growth and development of the nation, therefore the workforce found in early childhood programmes and institutions need to dive into the sea of transformation that is flooding our worlds so as to provide intellectual and creative manpower required for global competition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is some recognition that early childhood education is a growing field but not yet well understood or well respected. Early childhood education should be made a compulsory course to be offered in our colleges and universities.
- The curriculum for teacher preparation programme should be regularly reviewed to ensure uniformity and quality.
- Governments and all other stakeholders should provide real incentive and direct resources towards early childhood education programmes.
- Provide financial support to association of childhood educators to pay for national accreditation to prevent every Dick and Harry from entering into the profession
- More financial support for our child development laboratory school would greatly contribute to improving our departments.
- Academic qualifications are not suffice for relating, caring or teaching children; there should be formal authorization to practice which should be provided through teacher certification process whereby a state, through its department of education, issues you a license to teach or practice in other capacities once you have met their certification requirements.

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