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*Editor*

**Aminu Ladan Sharehu, Ph.D, NPOM, FNIM, FICEN**

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## **Best Practices in Early Childhood Care Teacher Education (ECCTE)**

QUEEN OBINAJU

### **Introduction**

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a relatively new area of study in tertiary institutions when compared with primary, secondary and other sectors of education. Even in practice, Early Childhood Education is also relatively new but is fast gaining grounds in Nigeria. It may have started in the 1960s in big towns like Lagos but today it has spread to every nook and cranny of Nigeria. There is hardly any village that does not have Early Childhood Education of some sort, the quality notwithstanding.

This, therefore, raises the need for teacher training for Early Childhood Education. The inclusion of ECE in the National Policy on Education (NPE) further accords it the recognition and prominence for attention. The recent Nigerian policy that every existing primary school should have an ECE section attached to it further gives mandate to tertiary institutions such as colleges of education and universities to train teachers for this level of education.

The interest of National Teachers Institute to seek best practices in Early Care Teacher Education during the 4<sup>th</sup> National Teachers Summit is surely a step in the right direction. The choice of a specialist in the area to deliver this paper is also God given wisdom.

In this paper, therefore, we shall seek to understand what we mean by Early Childhood Care (ECC), best practices in teacher training and the requirements of a teacher of ECC.

### **Early Childhood Care (ECC): Meaning**

Early Childhood Care as the name implies starts from conception until the child starts primary school. Several developmental psychologists (Latham, 1977; Obinaju, 2000; UNICEF, 2000, and Obinaju, 2002) have testified that stimulation starts from the pre-natal days. It is not difficult to convince one that stimulation is already going on at birth and even after that. Early Childhood Education therefore, refers to all manner of education given to the child prior to entry into primary school. The National Policy on Education recognizes early childhood education to mean “education given (to the child) in an educational institution prior to entering the primary school” (NPE 2004:11).

From the discussions above, it is worthy of note that experts do not limit Early Childhood Education to the school years which normally range between age 3-5. In the latest edition of the National Policy on Education, the age bracket has not been emphasized. This also implies that there is increased awareness of a larger age range than what was speculated before now (3-5 years). Whatever the conception, Early Childhood Education includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten, all before entering the primary school. The purpose includes:

- (a) effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- (b) prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- (c) provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, etc.);
- (d) inculcate social norms;
- (e) inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc;
- (f) develop a sense of cooperation and team-spirit;
- (g) learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
- (h) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc. through play (NPE, 2004:11).

UNICEF has done a tremendous work in the area of provision of minimum standard for early childhood care centers and the propagation of an integrated approach to early childhood care and education. According to Obinaju (2002), Early Childhood Education should involve all practices which will ensure the child's optimal survival, growth and development. She also stipulates that Early Childhood Education should be a joint venture between different sectors; health (immunization and sanitation), works (architectural and aesthetics), education (cognitive, affective and psychomotor) and all other such sectors. It is in conjunction and cooperation of all these sectors that Early Childhood Education can be properly executed for Nigeria to reap the best from her children who are surely the hope of tomorrow.

### **Best Practices in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**

1. There should be no identification by the child that he is in school. This requires that the ECCE centres should be as informal as possible in nature.
2. The methods used in inculcating the required skill should be basically through play and the use of play items such as toys. The child should be guided to explore his environment and nature in an informal manner. By so doing, he becomes inquisitive and creative, learning to solve his problems as they arise in this respect.
3. The environment needs to be void of accidents and threatening circumstances. In other words, the environment must be safe. Classrooms must be spacious and well ventilated (Obinaju, 1996). Playgrounds must have assorted play equipments which

must invite the child to play without the threat of getting injured. These calls for adequate size of playground and various contexts (grass, sand, water, floor).

4. Early childhood education in practice requires health workers who would be able to diagnose, treat if necessary any ailment at its early stage and where necessary refer for specialist's attention.
5. Water supply and toiletry sanitation should be of impeccable standard.
6. The teacher-pupil ratio should be low to afford one care giver the opportunity of taking care of not more than 5 children depending on the class and age of children so that adequate care can be given to the children.

From the above, it should be inferred that early childhood education practice should be better than an average home because there is an institutionalized sanitation practice, tested and certified water and food consumption for the time the child is at school and care from an adult as opposed to house help (child) care for the child. Further, it is better than the situation in all homes because unlike at home, the child finds many age mates to play with and by that develops the spirit of cooperation and competition which will see him through all aspects of life.

#### **Requirements for Early Childhood Education Teachers**

1. The teacher must be matured in age, temperament and disposition.
2. He must be trained to have enough patience and childlike appeal.
3. He must have at his finger tips the age related characteristics of children so that he would know what to expect of a child and when it becomes abnormal.
4. He must be well versed in child policy issue in Nigeria; taking care that his practice does not violate any.
5. Skills required of the child such as psychomotor, affective and cognitive should already be known to the teacher and his initiative at inculcating should not be questionable.
6. He should be resourceful in acquisition, production and utilization of instructional materials.
7. The child's language acquisition to a large extent depends on the teacher's knowledge and utilization of children's literature. Therefore, the teacher should be competent in the selection and application of the different areas of children's literature.
8. Other skills required of the Early Childhood teacher as identified by Obinaju (2011) include ingenuity, flexibility, tolerance, confidence, accuracy and spontaneity.

By these ways and other related strategies, he would be able to deliver the objectives earlier stated in this paper.

## **Best Practices in Early Childhood Care and Teacher Education (ECCTE)**

1. Early childhood care and teacher education should recruit willing and interested hands. Willingness and interest are germane to the course of Early Childhood Care Education. This is a sector as earlier identified that needs a lot of patience and ingenuity to be able to deliver the required care. Only motivated staff can exhibit the level of willingness expected.
2. Professionals (care givers, nurses and teachers) are the only qualified people to work in the sector. Working at the early childhood education centre requires the professional that have already acquired the required professional qualifications before being trained by a short course for Early Childhood Education. This will give him the body of knowledge in his profession and the technique of applying his profession to Early Childhood Education.
3. Operators of early childhood system should ensure that teachers and other functionaries at the early childhood stage are well remunerated as the care they provide is all round and expected to be 24 hours especially to relieve the parents to be at work for productive ventures.
4. Care must be taken that teachers apply hands-on practice to early childhood care and education. The era when teachers only talk to children while standing erect is over. They must be on the floor, lying down, sitting, squatting or crawling depending on what the moment requires.
5. Care must be taken to ensure that the purpose for Early Childhood Education is achieved. By this, I mean the curriculum must be strictly followed and the contents must at all time respond to the provisions of the aims and objectives of this level of education.

From the above, it should be noted that the practice of bringing in unqualified personnel to man Early Childhood Care and Education centres is not only unethical but criminal. It is equally unethical to give shabby and shallow training to a holder of GCE O level and pronounce him qualified to teach at the early childhood level.

I recognize that there is a move and is currently being practiced that students are admitted to read NCE for 3 years and qualify to teach at the early childhood level as NCE holders. If this is so, they need elaborate hands-on practice in the field after the initial probably six months' instruction. Their training should be likened to that of clinical students who are taught in Teaching Hospitals using true patients. A six-week teaching practice (multiplied by two) is obviously not enough for one to qualify as an Early Child Education practitioner.

## **Conclusion**

This discussion has been very interesting as it has afforded us the opportunity to reflect on what Early Childhood Care and Education is, what should be the best practices in Early Childhood Care and Education, the requirements of Early Childhood Care Teacher Education and the overall best practice in Early Childhood Care Teacher education.

In all we have noted that Early Childhood Care and Education starts even before the child is born. It requires care, stimulation, commitment, and interest on the part of the practitioner. It further requires an integrated approach on the part of the provider and above all, it has been recommended that for the best practice in Early Child Care and Education to be achieved, professionals in related areas need to be first qualified in their respective areas before receiving instruction to function in Early Childhood Care and Education centres.

I sincerely thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my reflections with you and hope that this will go a long way to influencing our practice so that children at the Early Childhood Care and Education level will receive the very best and Nigeria will benefit from them today and in the future.

Thank you for your audience.

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