

The national minimum standard on early child care centers in Nigeria: Case study of public ECCC in NNEWI south primary schools

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Abstract

The benefits of preschool education to children depend on the quality of learning offered by these centres. For quality improvement and accessibility to all children, the federal government gave directive to the ministry of education to attach ECC Centres to all existing primary schools in the country. The extent to which the ministry of education has carried out this new policy and the extent of public ECCCentres compliance to the federal government minimum standard of establishment is the challenge that faced this study. This is with the view of coming up with recommendations that will help to better the conditions and quality of preschool education in Nigeria and the world at large. The study made use of descriptive survey design. Nnewi south local government area has 67 public primary schools out of which 58 has ECCC attached to it. A purposive sampling technique was used to select sixteen (16) public primary schools from the 58 public primary schools with preschool centers as the sample population. Their 16 head teachers and 22 preschool class teachers formed the respondents. The instrument used for collection of data was a check list drafted by the researchers from the federal government national minimum standard for ECCC in Nigeria which serves as the bench mark for the study. The checklist has five sub headings to cover the five research questions that guided the study. The instrument was properly validated by experts. The study discovered that not all the primary schools in Nnewi south have early child care centres attached to them and that the standard of the early child care centers did not measure up in all areas tested to the expected standard in the federal government national minimum standard for ECCC. In line with the findings, the researchers recommended among others that the ministry of education must ensure that all the primary schools in the state have ECCC attached to them as directed by federal government of Nigeria and that federal government should provide adequate age appropriate facilities to the ECC centres to improve the quality of learning outcomes in these centers.

Keywords: Preschools, Education, Minimum, Standard, Child care

Introduction

In Nigeria, the importance of preschool education cannot be over emphasized. That is why the federal government has taken a giant step to ensure that preschool education is given its place in the country's educational system. This could be seen in the laudable educational objectives of preprimary education stipulated in the national policy on education^[1] as follows:

- Effect smooth transition from home to school.
- Preparing the child for the primary level of education.
- Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are away at work.
- Creating individuals who are responsible citizens.
- Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the
- Exploration of nature and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities etc.
- Teaching cooperation and team spirit.
- Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colors, shapes forms etc through play.
- Teaching of good habits, especially good health habits

These preschool educational objectives could only be achieved through meeting the necessary requirement for the establishment of preschool centers. This is vital because the preschool education is the bed rock of the nations educational system, every educational system stands on that early

foundation. The quality of such educational system should be of utmost priority to everyone concerned.

Preschool education could be seen as a preparatory school for children before they enter the primary school. This is to give them smooth transition to primary education and lay solid foundation for future education. Previously in Nigeria, organized education of the child below primary school age does not receive official recognition until very recently when the deserved attention was given. It was the missionaries in the early 20th century that introduced preprimary education in Nigeria. The preschools were set up in the western and eastern region of Nigeria. During the colonial era, there was semblance preschool education called kindergarten schools. This consisted of groups of children considered not yet ready for primary school education. As^[2] observed, the grouping for instruction in schools was not based on age, some children aged six or even more could be found in some of the infants classes. Later such arrangement was phased out.

With the phasing out of such kindergarten classes, some working parents began to feel the need for preschool education where they can keep their under aged children while at work. According to^[2]. during the pre-independence era, all efforts for the provision of preschool education were confined to the voluntary sector and received little or no attention from the government.

The urgency for preschool education was stirred up during the world education forum held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 where there was a decision to provide quality basic education

for all children and youths. Part of this recognition is that the government in the policy encouraged private efforts in the provision of preschool education in the country. This arrangement made many individuals to see preschool education as a lucrative business and this resulted to proliferation of preschools centers in flats of rented buildings, batchers, churches, and institutions as demonstration schools^[3]. With little or no government supervision, the proliferation affected the standard of preschool education in Nigeria because of gap of absence of uniformity in curriculum and standard. Some of the preschool centers were run in flats, batchers, under the trees and the content of what they learn were decided by the owners of such schools. Preschool education became very expensive that not many people could afford it. Many of the pupils who could not afford it were left out. Early child care development (ECCD) survey conducted by federal government of Nigeria in the year 2000, reported that there was a disparity between the expected and actual enrolment of preschool children. The expected enrolment was 22million pupils against 2.02 million with 19.98 million out of school^[4]. Based on this gap, a directive was issued by federal government of Nigeria to State Universal Basic Education (SUBEB) through federal ministry of education to attach early child care centers (ECCC) to every public primary school in the country. This was in line with UBE acts of 2004^[11]. In addition 5% of UBE intervention fund was set aside for the provision of preschools in Nigeria. The federal government intervention in early years learning and development is firmly rooted in the national philosophy on education which is premised on the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizens and the need for quality of educational opportunities to all Nigerian children irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities.

Early Child Care Centre (ECCC) or Preschool education has been defined in the national policy on education as education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 – 5 years plus prior to entering primary schools. Some people described it as early care education (ECE).According to^[6]. ECE is the term commonly used to describe the formal teaching and care of young children by people other than their family or in setting outside of their homes^[7]. This early care education spans the human life from birth to age 8and this is the period of greatest growth and development, when the brain develops most rapidly almost at its fullest^[7].

Preschool education age corresponds to a critical period of rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial development of the child. The years between birth and age 5 are the foundation upon which successful lives are built^[6]. The quality and intensity of the care, nutrition and stimulation the child receives during this period determines to a large extent the level of physical and cognitive development a child can attain^[8]. Preschool education fall short of the expectations that will help Nigeria to attain the desired position among other nations of the world due to the level it was placed. This was the reason for the federal government policy issuance on national minimum standard for quality assurance in 2007.

Although ECCC has been in operation for many years, the 1998 national policy on education does not specifies the guidelines for operation of preschool education in Nigeria, it did not specify the care and support requirements for children aged 0-3 years. This was a major gap that has left the operation of ECCC and preprimary education more in the

hands of private operators without adequate guidelines or standard. Most of the ECCC were far from being child friendly^[9, 10, 11]. This was one of the reasons why the issue of national minimum standard of establishment of ECCC became necessary. To bridge that gap for standard, the federal government through NERDC brought out a national minimum standard for the establishment of preprimary school centers in 2007. This also serves as the guideline for the operators and stake holders so that both the practice and operation of preschool education will become standardized nationally. The extent of the conformity of the public preprimary school centers to the minimum standard requirement is the challenge that faced this study. This calls for frequent program evaluation in line with the standard bench mark to make judgments and to find out what is happening on the ground as far as the program me is concerned, what is expected of it and a way forward.

Evaluation or examination of a programme involves assessing the strength and weakness of a program, policies, personnel, product and organization to improve their effectiveness. When a programme is evaluated it is to find out the situation of the programme on the ground with a view to making a judgment about the programme. To evaluate a programme actively, there must be a bench mark to look at for a favorable comparison between what should and what is for better assessment and a way forward. The need for bench mark is to put a check on the quality of preschool education given. It is a move for quality assurance.

The prescribed national minimum standard for ECCC rests on the type of ECCC, nature of playground, classroom furniture, teacher's qualification, availability of the recommended curriculum, instructional materials, teacher pupil ratio, and this will serve as the bench mark for this study which examines the status of public ECCC attached to primary schools in Nnewi south in line with the national minimum standard on early child care centers in Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

Early child care development (ECCD) survey conducted by federal government of Nigeria in the year 2000, reported that there was a disparity between the expected and actual enrolment of preschool children. The expected enrolment was 22million pupils against 2.02 million with 19.98 million out of school^[4]. Based on this gap, a directive was issued by federal government of Nigeria to State Universal Basic Education (SUBEB) through federal ministry of education to attach early child care centers (ECCC) to every public primary school in Nigeria. The extent the ministry of education has implemented this directive and the extent of the conformity of the public preschools to federal government national minimum standard guideline is the reason for this study, which examined the extent of conformity of public ECCC in Nnewi south local government area to federal government national minimum standard guideline for ECCC. The findings and the recommendations of the study will help to place the ECCC to an enviable position in the whole world.

Methodology

This study which examined the extent of compliance of public Early Child Care Centers (ECCC) to Federal Government national minimum standard in Nnewi south local

government area used descriptive survey design. Nnewi south local government area has 62 public primary schools out of which 58 has ECCC attached to it. Both convenience and purposive sampling technique was used to select sixteen (16) public primary schools from the 58 public primary schools with preschool centers as the sample population. Their 16 head teachers and 22 preschool class teachers formed the representative sample. The instrument used for collection of data was a checklist drafted by the researchers from the federal government national minimum standard for ECCC in Nigeria which serves as the bench mark for the study and through observation. The checklist has five major sub items which are: the rate of enrolment, nature of classroom and play facilities, teachers qualification, availability of instructional materials and school records, and accessibility of curriculum. The checklist was validated by two lecturers from the department of early childhood and primary education Nnamdi Azikiwe university Awka and was found suitable for the study. The data obtained from the instrument were analyzed using frequency count and simple percentage.

The study was guided by five research questions (RQ) to provide answers to the five sub major items in the checklist.

Research questions 1

1. What is the enrolment rate in public ECCC in Nnewi south L. G. A.
2. Do the classroom furniture and play facilities meet the federal government standard guide lines for public ECCC in Nnewi south local government area?
3. Do the teacher’s qualifications meet the federal government standard guide lines for public ECCC in Nnewi south LGA
4. Do the instructional materials meet the standard recommended for preprimary schools in public ECCC in Nnewi south L. G. A.
5. Is the recommended curriculum for preprimary schools available in public ECCC in Nnewi south L. G. A.

Presentation of result

Table 1: Rate of enrolment in public preschools in Nnewi south LGA.

s/n	Sampled schools represented with alphabets	Nursery 1	Nursery 2	Nursery 3	Observed
1	A	12	12	-	All together in one class
2	B	14	32	9	All together in two classes
3	C	12	13	12	One class
4	D	11	9	8	One class
5	E	3	19	-	One class
6	F	15	29	19	two class
7	G	17	23	-	One class
8	H	20	-	-	One class
9	I	11	23	6	One class
10	J	12	15	3	One class
11	K	32	16	2	two classes
12	L	16	11	12	One class
13	M	12	11	4	One class
14	N	39	13	11	Two classes
15	O	46	9	-	Two classes
16	P	32	22	2	Two classes

From the study it was observed that not all the schools have ECCC attached to them. In other words the primary schools in Nnewi south did not adhere strictly to the federal government national minimum standard directive to have

preschool attached to primary schools. The pupil’s population was high in some schools and the federal government ratio of 1: 25 pupils in addition to one helper was not implemented as stipulated.

Table 2: Classroom furniture and play facilities

Federal government guideline	Observation	Remark
There should be a class size of 12x65m to accommodate 25 pupils	The population of the pupils in few schools were suitable for the class size but many of the schools have overcrowded classrooms due to insufficient no of classrooms	Partly met the standard
There should be cross ventilation in each class, that is two windows located in opposite direction	Majority met the standard except school K built in a batcher with only one window and door.	Partly met the standard
Two door ways	Most schools have two door ways with exception of schools A,J,K,O,P that have one door way each	Partly met the standard
Each classroom must have veranda on either side	All the schools visited have veranda in front	None met the standard
there must be toilets and wash hand basin	All the schools have toilets but only schools B, D, G, M have improvised wash hand basins.	Partly met the standard
Playground well grassed and have play facilities like swings, slide, sea saw, toys etc	Most schools have good play ground though not grassed but none has play facilities	Partly met the standard
Must have a tract of hard surface for pushing movable toys	No school has that	None met the standard

Provision of age appropriate chairs and tables	Some of the schools like schools D, H, L, K have pews while others have single chairs, some with rubber tables not age appropriate.	None met the standard
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Almost all the schools did not meet the standard of the Guideline stipulated as it concerns classrooms provisions, furnitures and play ground and facilities.

Table 3: Teachers and head teacher’s qualifications

Requirement : NCE should be the least qualification for preschool teachers	All the teachers and head teachers in the schools visited have NCE as their minimum qualification.	Standard was met
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The result shows that all the teachers in the schools visited Have NCE as their minimum qualification.

Table 4: Recommended curriculum

Availability of approved ECCE curriculum? Accessibility to approved curriculum	No head teacher accepted having the approved ECCE curriculum	None met the standard -----
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The head teachers and teachers denied having knowledge of The approved ECCE curriculum talk less of making use of it.

Table 5: Availability of instructional materials

There must be instructional materials as picture rolls toys, TV, video machine.	No school visited has picture rolls, TV, toys etc	Non met the standard
Time book visitors books, register, and other records,	All the schools have time book and visitors books	All met the standard

The schools visited do not have instructional materials but have good records on different areas.

Discussions

From the study the researchers observed that the federal government directive to attach ECCC to all existing primary schools have been carried out. The evidence could be seen from the area of the study Nnewi south LGA where out of 62 public primary schools 58 schools have ECCC attached to them with an insignificant no of 4 schools yet to implement the policy. This shows that the ministry of education has started the implementation in the country. on the issues of the enrolment rate, the rate was high in some schools that even the available classrooms were overcrowded. In all the schools used in the study, nursery 1, 2, and 3 were seated together. They were not separated. This was because of in adequate classrooms buildings. The stipulated federal government guideline was not met. The issue of the schools having quality, age appropriate furniture was not met by any school. Most of the schools have pew sand some single chairs, few out of the single chairs have tables while many have just no tables. The standard guide line was not met. This was in tandem with the findings of [9, 10, 11] that found out in their studies that most ECCC were far from being child friendly. They further explained that the teaching learning environment in those schools were uncondusive and not suitable for children learning.

The school buildings were supposed to have two verandas and two doorways. All the school visited had only one veranda in front of the school building and one big door way. No schools visited met the standard guidelines in such provisions. This does not ensure enough security for the children. Since children are characterized with frequent running around, there is need for two verandas and two door ways for free and easy movement.

On issue of teacher’s qualifications, the researchers found out that all the head teachers and teachers in all the schools visited have a minimum teaching qualification of NCE as recommended in the national minimum standard. Many of the teachers have their degree. In other words all the schools visited met the stipulated standard. This is very important for quality learning outcome at this level of education. This was why [12]. Stated that quality of teacher’s education cannot be over emphasized because lack of it can result in the low quality skilled manpower and that will have adverse effect on the development of the nation.

The issue of availability of instructional material and play facilities need serious attention. None of the schools visited have instructional materials as stated in the federal government national minimum standard of establishment. Such instructional materials like toys, educational charts, TVs, Videos were never available in any of the schools. Few that were seen with the children were personal toys. In addition there were no play facilities in the schools. Such play facilities like swings, slides, merrygo round etc were never available. This issues need urgent attention, this is because children at this stage engage in play as a way of learning and to deprive the children of play facilities means to take away learning from them. This was supported by [13]. Who stated that play is a natural activity which contributes to children development as well as gives them satisfaction and enjoyment.

The federal government minimum standard of establishment of ECCC emphasized that an approved age appropriate curriculum must be available. This was a great problem because in all the schools visited, most head teachers and teachers have acknowledge of such curriculum but denied having seen it nor using it. No school met the standard guide line. One begins to ask what they teach these children. This calls for an urgent attention on the ministry of education to

come to the aid of such schools and make curriculum available to them.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the preprimary school has a positive influence on a child's education in future. For this to be achieved the federal government policy on minimum standard must be implemented for quality childhood education. This involves the federal and state government must as a matter of urgency provide adequate teaching learning facilities, fund, organize in service training for the teachers, have effective supervision machinery and insist on the implementation of the federal government national minimum benchmark for preschool establishment in the country. In the line of the above, the writers concluded that for the country to have quality future leaders, the education of the early years must be treated with every sense of seriousness for effective quality outcome.

Recommendations

The writers, in accordance with the findings of the study recommended as follows:

1. That the federal government that initiated the national minimum standard for establishment of preschools should fund the preschools and provide necessary teaching learning facilities for quality learning outcomes.
2. The federal government should through the ministry of education organize annually, capacity building workshops for the teachers to help get them on the know of the current developments in education unit.
3. The ministry of education should have a functional supervisory team that will ensure that the recommended policy on preschool establishment be implemented accordingly.
4. The preschool heads should ask for help from the parents associations of their schools to assist the government in bettering the condition of their children's schools through provision of teaching learning facilities.
5. The ECCC curriculum should be distributed to every preschools for use.

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