



Revitalization of Nigerian Education System: The Role of Nutrition for Better Early Childhood Care and Education for National Development

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Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education is seen today as the very foundation for nations to achieve sustainable development. Early Childhood Care and Education need to be revitalized for Nigeria to achieve greatness in the community of nations. The unfortunate situation is that children attending these schools must be well-fed if sound education is to be guaranteed. It is in view of this that the paper explains the meaning of Early Childhood Care and Education and its goal. The paper also highlights the different categories food requirement of children that will help in optimum of the children and its influence on school performance. Parent should be sensitized on the need for adequate diet for their children to grow well and perform well in school.

Keywords: Revitalization, Early Childhood Care and Education, nutrition, school performance

Introduction

Education has for long being recognized as a potent force that guarantees the development of many nations, Nigeria inclusive. Revitalization of education system should therefore be a continuous process. Nigerian being one of the economically viable nations in Africa South of the Sahara cannot jettison any of her education system from early childhood care and education up to the university level. The National Policy on Education (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004) has reiterated that the government will no longer fold its arms in the provision of ECCE in Nigeria. It will ensure that all children irrespective of the social divide must enjoy ECCE. This may not be unconnected with the fact that early stimulation, nutrition, and certain rudimentary learning activities will forever remain indelible in the mind children and it may be the real foundation for their educational career in life. It will be also the propeller for national development.

The National Policy on Education has proclaimed that all public schools must, henceforth establish pre-primary sections in their respective compounds to take care of the need for ECCE for children of the urban poor and rural dwellers as well (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004). It is estimated over 70 per cent of Nigerians are poor. So obviously, their children coming to ECCE classes must be suffering from nutritional deficiencies. The role of nutrition in promoting child development and educational outcome is increasingly being recognized (Bundy and Guyatt, and Brooks, 1996). It is also revealed that undernourished children scored lower than better-nourished

children on tests of cognitive functioning, have poor psychomotor development and fine motor skills, have lower activity levels, interact with others less frequently, fail to acquire skills at normal rates, have lower enrolment rate, and complete fewer grades of schooling (Alderman, Hoddinott and Kinsey, 2006).

The Concept of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Early Childhood Care and Education has metamorphosed from a single sector approach to multi-sectoral, covering intervention in health, nutrition, care, stimulation, protection and participation of the child which help information and development of intelligence and social behaviour of the child (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007). The National Policy on Education (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004) sees Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as pre-primary education and this education is given in an educational institution to children before they enroll into primary school. It is given to the category of children who did not reach the age of 6. The institutions are the nursery and the kindergarten.

The human child requires support, care and protection through the provision of good health care, nutrition and psychological care, which help the development of his intelligence, personality, social and emotional behaviour. According to United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a formal teaching and care of young children by people other than their family members or settings outside home.

Goals of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (FME, 2007) has outlined the objectives of ECCE for the country.

These are as follows:

- a) Provide care and support that will ensure the rights of the child to:
 - i. Good nutrition and health
 - ii. Healthy and safe environment
 - iii. Psycho-social stimulation
 - iv. Protection and participation
- b) Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys.
- c) Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while parents/guardians are at work.
- d) Effect smooth transition from the home to the school.
- e) Prepare the child to adapt successfully when his or her current context changes.
- e) Develop a healthy, well-nourished, adequately stimulated child able to achieve its fullest potentials (FME, 2007).

Early Childhood Care and Education and National Development

Early Childhood period is the stage in human growth and development which begins from immediately after birth to 5 years (Gross, 2012). This stage is very crucial as it lays the foundations of the child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Growth of mental and



physical abilities progress at an astounding rate and a very high proportion of learning take place during this period. It is a time when children particularly need high quality personal care and learning experiences.

Education begins from the moment a child is born and this will continue at home, in the neighbourhood and in pre-school institutions. With this in mind, babies and toddlers need positive early learning experiences which will kick-start their intellectual, social and emotional and lay the foundation for their later educational success.

Early childhood care and education helps to guarantee safe, nurturing, stimulating, protection, psycho-social care and participation of children in later life. By the time the child passed through this level of education he would have acquire good social behaviour, stable emotion and above all, has learned some rudimentary of numbers, letters, shapes, forms, good habits of inquiry, cooperation, health, social etc.

During the first three years of the child's life, parents hold the key to the child's learning experiences. What parents do and expose their children to, have tremendous impact on the development of the children in all facets of life. Parents who choose to participate in mother-toddler group of child care arrangements or centre-based child-care, may have the potential to provide high-quality, individualized, responsive, and stimulating experiences that will influence the child's overall development.

National development implies that there is improvement and advancement at both individual and national levels as well. Badayi in Yantumaki (2008) sees development as the progress, growth/achievement of an individual, an institution, an organization, a community, a group, a society etc. Since human resources is indispensable for the overall development of any nation, there is the need to harness it at a very early stage. This stage is no other than at ECCE level.

Since nutrition is very essential in the development of all organs and structures of human body then for Nigeria to develop well there is a need for the country to ensure that children at pre-school are adequately fed. This is imperative because most of the organs of these children, especially the brain are still yet to develop to its full capacity. And the brain being the most important organ central to learning requires protein-based food for optimum cell development.

Concept of Nutrition

Nutrition is the science of looking at how the body absorbs nutrients and how and why people eat food. Nutrition is also seen as the process by taking in and utilizing food substances that guarantees energy supply and building of body tissues. Carbohydrate, proteins, fats and oil, vegetables, fruits, mineral irons, are the sources of nutrients which the early child requires for optimum growth and development of his/her structures and organs particularly brain which plays a significant role in cognitive activities. Inadequate intake of these, led to malnutrition children (Habicht, 2.015).

Balanced Diet and Nutritional Status of Pre-School Children



Children who are properly fed on balanced diet develop faster than children who lack this. Such children are always active and regular in school attendance, highly motivated and look healthy. These children are attentive in class as most, if not all, their senses are functioning well. Proper nutrition is essential for growth, development as well as general well-being of the children as food is critical for the survival of the human species (Ake-Teno and Whitaker, 2011). Good nutrition is essential for physical, intellectual and emotional development of early childhood period. Good nutrition helps to improve chances of child's survival, it promote healthy growth and development and contribute to better cognitive development during early childhood period. It also reduces mortality rate and the risks of killer diseases like tuberculosis, kwashiorkor, diabetes, cardiovascular disease etc. Nutritional status of a person is a measurement of the extent to which his physiological needs for nutrients are being met. It also refers to the state of his health, which is a product of a balance between nutrient intake and utilization by his body (Halterman, 2001). Pre-school children are more vulnerable to the effects of lack of nutrition than their older counterpart. A study conducted by Bellisle (2004) on effects of breakfast on cognition on younger children skipping breakfast indicated an adverse effect on both general energy-level and cognition of these children. Bellisle (2004) further showed that consuming breakfast resulted in better scores on three different types of tests administered on pre-school children.

Sources of Nutrition

1. **Carbohydrate-based foods:** These are energy giving food which children require to be active throughout the day-to-day activities. These foods include cereals/grains, root crops, such as yam, cassava, cocoyam etc.
2. **Protein-based foods:** These are body building food materials. They are categorized into two major groups. We have first class protein, whose sources include meat, fish, egg etc. we equally have what is called second class protein based, which include beans, banana, groundnut etc.
3. **Fats and oil:** These helps to protect the tissues.
4. **Vitamins:** These fight diseases and protect the body.
5. **Minerals:** These help to add value to human health.

Nutritional Influence on School Performance

Nutrition is very essential in child's cognitive and physical development. Studies have demonstrated that nutrition affects pupils' thinking ability, behaviour and health. All these factors are noted to have influence on school performance. Nutrition efficiencies in early life can affect the cognitive development of school-aged children, and access to nutrition improves pupils' cognition, concentration and energy levels. Poor nutrition is noted to have adverse indirect effect on school performance of the children. Poor nutrition can make the child susceptible to illness such as headaches, malnutrition and stomach aches, resulting in school absence (Brown, Beardslee and Prothrow-Stith, 2008). If this happens, then obviously the child will miss several lessons/units, which will automatically make his colleagues to be ahead of him/her.



Silas (2002) investigated the causes and effects of malnutrition among children in Oredo Local Government Area of Edo state. The result obtained showed that poor nutrition reduces children intellectual capability, interest in the environment and motor development. Atinmo (2014) also conducted similar study on hunger and nutrition at the University of Ibadan, Oyo State. He discovered that nutrition is a developmental issue just like the economy. If a country refused to feed its younger generation, it will be face with a lot of challenges from all angles. He opined that most severely affected areas in Nigeria as far as nutrition is concerned are the North-East geo-political zone of Nigeria. Ironically this is the area least developed in the whole nation and have the highest level of insecurity. He suggested that both government and non-governmental organizations should mobilize and address food security, security and unemployment ravaging the region.

Conclusion

Thus, nutrition for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) children is highly essentials in Nigeria. Nutrition provided the base from where the child will strive and develop all the capacities for his individual progress and the nation as well. National development of the country rest on having healthy, well-educated and well-motivated populace, which will happen when nutrition is well provided to the younger children attending pre-school institutions.

Suggestions

1. Parents should be enlightened through various media on need for adequate nutrition for children in their formative years.
2. Local Government Councils should devise a means of providing nutritional supplement for children attending Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) classes in public schools.
3. United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and other non-governmental organizations should collaborate with government in addressing poor nutrition among children attending public ECCE classes.
4. School inspection should also include nutritional checks on children attending Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) classes in public schools.

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