

Nigeria, 3rd February 2010 - Education starts from the cradle. Experts say catching children young with quality education remains a veritable tool to lifelong development. Chika Mefor reports that a one day stakeholder's meeting held recently in Abuja was aimed at emphasising early childhood education.

The future of a nation's socio-economic and political wellbeing lies with the quality of children's education because they are the future leaders. If they have a shaky foundation when it comes to education, it will surely affect their lives when they are adults and in turn affect the nation. Many children in Nigeria and Africa have no opportunity to experience the much needed early childhood education. Why? Some at early stage have to help cater for the need of the family. Ify is a good example of such. She is seven years and lives with her mother and two siblings. They live in a remote part of a village in Niger State. Ify attends school and is in primary two but most part of the session, school is deferred as she helps sell plantain chips her mother fries to help make ends meet.

Ify, like millions of children in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, have no chance to enjoy the early foundation that they need in education and to start up in life. Early childhood education is very important and is the organized practice of educating those who are in early childhood, one of the most vulnerable stages in life. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), it spans the human life from birth to age eight.

The early years, from birth to five years of age, are an important time in any child's life. Children go through a huge variety of learning stages during this time, making great steps, and what they learn at a young age offers an important foundation for their learning in later life. The learning process starts from home and then moved to the school and its responsibility lies upon the parents who are at home and the teachers who teach them in school.

The importance of early childhood education cannot be overemphasised. Speaking at a 1-day stakeholder's meeting on the Dissemination of Pre-service and In-service Report for Early Childhood Development recently, the minister of state for education, Barr Kenneth Gbagi stressed the importance of child education and stated that if not tackled, the standard of education in Nigeria will continue to dwindle because it forms the basis of how the children turn out in the future. He added that government has been doing everything in its power to find the solution to the problem of the sudden decline of education in the country.

"It will interest you to note that months back, one of the things the president discussed was to look into the issue of education and why suddenly the country has taken a back role when it comes to it. You can recall that years back, Nigerians had favorable contest in exams with their counterparts anywhere in the world and came out with flying colours."

He further stated that the duties and responsibility of molding the children was partly for the teachers and partly for the parents at home and lamented that as a result of the search for excessive wealth, parents have left these responsibilities to their house-helps which he said was appalling.

According to the minister, the early childhood care education subsector had been besieged with some challenges which include lack of basic infrastructure , uniform standard, relevant segregated data, funds and dearth of qualified teachers/ caregivers.

"Statistics show that 2.02 out of 22 million Nigerian children eligible for Early Childhood Education(ECD) have access to the services. Furthermore the policy of linking the ECD centers to existing public schools has further increased enrollment of children thereby adding pressure to the need for teachers/caretakers" he said.

Teachers, as always, have been in the fore front of the issue of early child education. According to the minister, the problems that have always reared its head in the society is the issue of having adequate hands that can teach the children at the early stage of their life. It was the reason for the study embarked by the Federal Ministry of Education, the World Bank and UNICEF to ascertain the capacity of the existing teacher education institutes in order to upgrade the skills of in-service teacher and pre-service early child education in Nigeria.

The outcome of the study would help the government to intervene and to help improve early child education through the education of well qualified teachers and caretakers for the nation's futures of tomorrow.

Also reiterating the importance of childhood education at the meeting, the Commissioner of Education in Kogi state, Sylvester Onoja declared that education in Nigeria will be on its way to recovery if the problems of the child, primary and secondary education were solved, which he said was the basic of all.

Onoja emphasised that the problem of education stemmed from these three sectors of education because they lay the foundation of what a child will be, noting that other sectors will start functioning well if these three were gotten right.

"If we can get child education , primary education and secondary education right, the education system in Nigeria will be on its way to recovery. Then we will get the other system of education functioning. Our priority number one is to solve the problem of child education, our problem number two is solving the problem of primary education and our problem number three is solving the problem of secondary education, after that we will get all the other system of education right."

In his goodwill message, Dr Kola of the World Bank expressed his distress on the amount spent on the Early Childhood Education (ECD), which he described as being low stressing that the teachers to teach the children were not enough and that in those available, only few have the right type of skills to execute the job. He promised that the World Bank will support and partner with governments that were ready to improve the child education in their state.

Two surveys carried out independently by Nigerian Educational Research & Development Council (NERDC) and National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) between 2003 and 2004, revealed that the few children who have access to early child development programme learn in poor condition with the teachers factor being the most critical. The sub sector is seriously plagued by inadequate supply of qualified teachers to provide care and support to the growing children.

The study to ascertain the capacity of the existing teacher institutions to upgrade the skills of in-service teacher and pre-service teachers which is co funded by the UNICEF and the World Bank is a step in the right direction for no amount of sacrifice will be too small for the leaders of the nation's tomorrow.

Source: [AllAfrica](#)