

TOWARDS A FUNCTIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN NIGERIA

SYLVESTER MWANDAR YAKWAL

&

RACHEAL ASIBI AMWE

*Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Education,
University of Jos.*

Abstract

The need for Early Childhood Education is indeed very crucial in the education of preschool children with visual impairments. Recent studies showing developmental delays in infants and children with visual impairments have triggered early childhood special education studies for this population. This paper discusses the need for a functional Early Childhood Education for preschool children with visual impairments. The planning and implementation of Early Childhood Education was presented. These services include infant, early childhood, diagnostic and referral services. In addition, the relevance of Early Childhood Education to Special Needs Education was discussed. The paper concluded by proffering recommendations on the importance of early childhood development for all children including those with visual impairments in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education, according to the FGN national policy on education (2004), is “education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school.” However one looks at it, early childhood education can also be referred to as a home or centre based provision of formal or informal pre-primary education for children from 0 to 5 or 6 years. It denotes education at the earliest years of life and it is a time to continue to build the foundational skills for later success in learning. Ajayi (2008) is of the opinion that although appreciable progress has been made in early childhood care and education in the past four years due to the Nigerian government policy requiring public schools to have pre-primary schools linkage, the proportion of children enrolled in early childhood care centers still remains low at approximately 12.3 million. This represents about 21% of the total population of children in this age group.

Early childhood education and care is especially crucial to children with visual impairment whose families are yet to overcome the psychological reaction of shock that accompany the birth of a visually impaired child into the family. According to Ayoku (1997), lack of vision tends to affect the child’s physical, emotional, social and language development as well as mobility which are crucial to the early childhood development of the child. In this wise, the need for a functional and viable early childhood education for preschool children with visual impairments in Nigeria is inevitable. The purpose of this

paper is to discuss the need for a functional early childhood education and care for preschool children with visual impairment and the services provided in early childhood education for such children in Nigeria.

The Need for a Functional Early Childhood Education for Preschool Visually Impaired Children

Studies have shown that many parents in Nigeria do not value pre-primary school education due to ignorance and lack of awareness on the need for Early Childhood Education. This is particularly apparent among the rural dwellers. Preschool children with visual impairment are not provided with quality early childhood education as their peers without special needs. They are usually left out in the early childhood educational system in Nigeria. There is no doubt that there are no inclusive and functional Early Childhood Education centers in the country to cater for this population and this makes the acquisition of early childhood learning activities impossible.

Generally, children acquire numerous skills at infancy and early childhood stage in life. The American Optometric Association (2012) asserts that approximately 85% of early learning during this period takes place through vision. Children with visual impairment do not often experience this early learning due to lack of vision. These skills are crucial to their development which in turn poses a challenge to the educational system in Nigeria to make Early Childhood Education a reality in the interest of preschool children with or without visual impairment.

Consequently, according to Ajayi (2008), the global Education for All Programme (EFA) declares that education is the right of every child and must not be denied it for any reason. This has been the assertion of the world summit on the state of global children which has led to the inclusion and expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education. She further affirmed that Nigeria has pledged its commitment to this with the recent inauguration of the policy on Early Childhood Education educational arm.

Infancy period is a time from birth to about two (2) years of age while early childhood is a period of schooling for young children, usually beginning at age three (3), intended to prepare them for elementary grades. This first stage of life is an important time, characterized by physical and emotional growth and development. Pre-school age corresponds to a critical period of rapid physical, cognitive and psychological development of the child. The quality and intensity of care, nutrition and stimulation a child receives during this period determines to a large extent on the level physical and cognitive development a child can attain. (Encarta, 2009).

Moreso, during the first 24 months the average child makes considerable gains in height and weight, begins teething, develops sensory discrimination, begins to walk and talk. Sensory acuity develops rapidly during the first three months of life. Research shows that newborns are capable of visual and auditory discrimination. By two days after birth infants can discriminate odors. Within three months they can distinguish color and form; they show a preference for complex and novel stimuli as opposed to simple and familiar

stimuli. Newborns perform motor movements, many of which are reflexive. Soon after birth they gain voluntary control of movements. The major stages of locomotion are crawling (propulsion using arms only), creeping (propulsion on hands and knees), and walking. The average infant walks between 13 and 15 months of age while it may take a longer time for a visually impaired child to walk.

Early childhood education provides an avenue for parents to become aware of the various stimulation activities that will enable them develop normally by providing them with the necessary adaptations.

Planning and implementation of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

The educational system in Nigeria has failed in the planning, funding and designing functional early childhood education in Nigeria. In conjunction with the declaration contained in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), much priority was given to early childhood education and was set to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To effect a smooth transition from the home to 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 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 toys, etc;
- f) Develop a sense of co-operation 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.

From the above, the question that is asked is what are the plans of the government in providing functional early childhood education for pre-school children? As it is deduced from the above mentioned objectives early childhood education should be encouraged by the government and should take cognizance of the visually impaired learners. However, the following are considered in establishing early childhood education centers in Nigeria: deciding the type of services; establishing centre based service centers; home based and hospital based centers; functional facilities and equipment e.g. playground; funding the centers and legislature

However, Farrel (2010) states that the PEI Department of Education And Early Childhood Development supports the philosophy of inclusion of students who are blind or visually impaired with their peers who are sighted in their community schools. Appropriate educational programmes are designed to meet the student's individual needs and assist the schools in providing necessary adaptations required by the students. Specifically, the early childhood services outlined by Farrel for children with visual impairment include the following;

1. Quality of staff-child interaction
2. Learning resources

3. Supportive environment
4. Effective communication with families of visually impaired children
5. Engaging parents and assessment of children's learning
6. Sharing educational aims with parents in improving the home learning environment and reinforcing learning between the home and early childhood service provision.

The services provided in early intervention programmes are designed to help children with visual impairment achieve early milestones and begin learning concepts that are appropriate for their age.

Early Childhood Educational Services

Early childhood education provides a wide range of services for children from birth to 6 years of age. Early intervention programme embraces services offered both for special needs children and their parents for the sake of ameliorating disabling conditions which could be presumed or established before it takes toll on the growing child.

Infant Educational Services: serving infants from birth to age three (3) in the in-home service are designed to help increase visual functioning, sensory awareness, communication, social skills as well as emotional development. Dolunay (2009) states that services in infant education may include weekly home visits from experienced specialist in to teach skill areas such as (visual and auditory development; Cognition and play (social, emotional and communication); fine and gross motor movement-self-help-skills-educational workshops.

Early childhood Educational Services: According to Dolunay (2009) early childhood educational serves children ages 3 to 6 and their families. These services provide essential support to help children successful transition into the special education school system and maximize their developmental progress. The services provided visually impaired children in early childhood education as outlined by Campana & Quimet (2012) include the following: parent support and advocacy training; IEP (Individualized Education Plan) support and guidance; phone consultations; periodic home visits; accompanying families to ophthalmologist/optometrist appointments; classroom teacher consultations; orientation and mobility consultations for specific areas and organizing family support groups.

Diagnostic and Referral service: These services can be difficult to make for visually impaired children (infants and toddlers). Diagnostic services are required if a child exhibits any sign of visual impairment and assessments are conducted in order to make referrals to professionals who can make formal diagnosis. The child may be referred to the early childhood programme by family members, healthcare or professional in the field of visual impairment and schools. (Dolunay, 2009)

Similarly, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2001) acknowledged that services can be provided to the child at home in early childhood education setting such as kindergartens, early childhood education centers and children start school. These services can include:

- a) Guidance and counseling for parents and teachers;
- b) Using techniques based around playing to learn new skills;

- c) Designing strategies to improve social and learning skills and behavior management;
- d) Speech and language therapy;
- e) Direct teaching support;
- f) The development of special resources such as communication aids;
- g) Coordinating physiotherapy, occupational therapy and equipment;
- h) Development of an individualized education programme;
- i) Professional teams working together on having an in depth understanding of early childhood education and knowledge of special education are relevant.

Relevance of Early Childhood Education to Special Needs Education

In developing countries such as Nigeria, the relevance of early childhood education has not been felt in most cases. This according to Ozoji (2005) is due to the fact that there are limitations in the implementation of the programme in terms of non-availability of skilled professionals and equipment in the identification of children with special needs. Early childhood education tends to minimize or prevent psychological impact of disability. This goes a long way to minimize such impact so that the pre- school visually impaired child can develop normally like their sighted peers during early years of life. The basic idea of early intervention is very closely related to the theory of the 'sensitive phases' in early childhood. This theory is based on the new thinking that aspects of children's future development are molded during such phases which have considerable influence on their later life (Zoniou-Sideri, 1997). He further asserts that this realization was an important step in understanding the value of providing stimulation for children with visual impairment who cannot learn by imitation as early as possible.

Recently there is now a broad agreement amongst professionals that earliest possible stimulation of children with special needs is a successful method for furthering a child's development and his/her integration into school and social life. In addition, the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2007) maintains that teachers in special needs education need integration and innovative practices of early childhood education in Nigeria. The early identification of special needs children who are likely to encounter difficulty in academic learning is most crucial to special needs education in contemporary times. The provision of early childhood education services are designed to support the child as soon as he/she has been identified as having a special need(s). These services are offered to both special needs children and their parents.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Early childhood care and education programmes for children with visual impairment from birth to 6 years in Nigeria ought to be developed,planned and implemented to promote physical, emotional, cognitive, social development and school readiness. These programmes and services cannot be sustained unless families and teachers are active partners. Teachers need to be educated in infant and early childhood education

programming and a specialist must hold a masters degree in early childhood special education, child development or related fields. They may have additional extensive training in visual impairment and assessment. Similarly, programs should be closely connected with physicians, therapists, educators and service co-coordinators to ensure a comprehensive support network that is available to children with visual impairment and their families.

REFERENCES

- Ajayi, O.H.(2008).Early childhood education in Nigeria: a reality or mirage?*Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. 9(4), 375-380. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304ciec.2008.9.4.375>.
- American Optometric Association (2012).Early Childhood Education.Rtrievedon 4thMarch, 2012 from <http://www.juniorblind.org/site/infant-ear>.
- Ayoku, F.A. (1997). Early childhood education intervention by the family of visually handicapped children.*The Exceptional Children*. 1 (2), 98-101.
- Campana, L.V. &Quimet, D.A. (2012).Infant and early childhood education programme.Retrieved on 3rd April, 2012 from <http://www.edam.com.tr/estp.asp>.
- Dolunay, K. (2009). Early childhood education special education for children with visual impairment:problems and solutions.*Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*. 9 (2), 823-832
- Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2007) Early Childhood Care and Education.UNESCO.
- Encarta (2009).*Early Childhood Education*.Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Farrel, M. (2010).Services for students who are blind or visually impaired. Retrieved form <http://www.gov.peca/eecd/index.php3?number3D1027837%lang53DE>
- Federal Government of Nigeria (2004).*National Policy on Education*.(4th edition).Lagos: NERDC Press
- New Zealand Ministry of Education (2001).Monitoring and encouraging communication in early childhood.Retrieved on March, 18th 2011 from <http://www.nezealand.govt.nz>.
- Zoniou-Sideri, A. (1997).The integration of a visually impaired child in a mainstream kindergarten. Pp.39-44. *International Consultation on Early Childhood and Special Educational Needs Organized by UNESCO in collaboration with UNICEF*. Paris.