

Assessing Early Childhood Education as a Link to Sustainable Development in the Twenty First Century

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Abstract

Sustainability in education refers to a training that gives essential tools to leading a whole life. Investigation in early childhood education is synonymous to building a sustainable society. In this review, early childhood education as a link to sustainable development is assessed. This review observed that the need for sustainable education in Nigeria begins with young children who are incapable of developing their potentials without the assistance of others. Findings also reveal three pillars of sustainable development namely, social development, economic development and environmental protection. The study shows that curriculum development exists to reflect learner's activities and experiences in teaching and learning in order to bring about sustainable development in education. It was therefore recommended among others that since early childhood and development is important for the successful and interesting nursery/primary school life of a child, education policymakers, planners, stakeholders, parents and teachers should engage in campaign to publicize and intimate the public on the gains of early childhood education. The study also recommends that private investors should be encouraged to go in partnership with ministry of education to ensure appropriate economic and human resources as well as environmental protection establishing early child education and development centres. Furthermore, curriculum development should include early child education development philosophy and training and above all, the role of the united nation in protecting the right of a young child should be complemented by parents, individuals, teachers, children and nations of the world.

Keywords: Education, early childhood, sustainable development, curriculum

Introduction

Early childhood is a vital period for young children due to the fact that it sets the foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing (Oloo, 2022). Oloo (2022) further asserts that early childhood education (ECE) should not be seen just as preparation for primary school but rather, target the holistic development of a child, thus holding the possibility to nurture competent, caring, responsible, and resilient future citizens. Moreover, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in early childhood needs to be embedded into

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the curricula of early childhood education (ECE), since it prepares these young children to be problem solvers to current and future challenges that they may encounter. Evidently, adopting this approach into formal school curricula as well as into non-formal learning settings will enhance securing a sustainable future for young children (Oloo, 2022). Nonetheless, there so little research on the theme of early childhood education for a sustainable development.

Educators have not given attention to research – related activities in early childhood education (Akinsemolu and Ogunkoya, 2021). It is quite important for educators to diversify their interest, look at the need to collect good practices on education for sustainable development in early years found in different countries and cultures which can inspire and guide the daily work of early childhood educators.

Education for sustainability should begin very early in life. This is because, it is in the early childhood period that children develop their basic values, attitudes, skills. behaviours and habits which may be long lasting. Studies have shown that racial stereotypes are learned early and that young children are able to pick up cultural messages about wealth and inequality. This is necessary as early childhood education is about laying a sound intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and physical foundation for development and lifelong learning. It has an enormous potential in fostering values, attitudes, skills and behaviours that support sustainable development. For example, wise use of resources, cultural diversity, gender equality and democracy.

Early childhood education is essential for establishing a sustainable system (Akinsemolu and Ogunkoya, 2021). Akinsemolu and Ogunkoya (2021) further observed that the health of children, behaviour, and learning during early years, act as the foundation for increasing the probability of school success and their ability to participate in society and community. Hence, to introduce new ways of thinking and new lifestyle, we have to begin with ECE which is the key to our future (Akinsemolu and Ogunkoya, 2021; Oloo, 2022; Thematic Group, 2015).

Moreover, one of the fundamental principles in the field of early childhood education that is increasingly relevant is the importance of encouraging educational activities that will bring about the development of young children (Oloo, 2022). In fact, most decisions that are good for children are based on a general knowledge of children's age, maturity, experience and cognitive abilities in relation to their socio-cultural and economic environment. Piaget's stages of cognitive development come readily to mind here. Piaget (1969) divides children's cognitive development into four stages with adaptation to physical and social environment through experience.

- i. Sensory motor stage (0-2 years). The child at this stage depends on movement and senses., reflex action and learns about its environment through those avenues.
- ii. Pre-operational stage (2-7 years). At this stage, the child's reasoning is not yet logical. The idea of measurement of volume or reversibility is not yet logical. The child is egoistic and needs encouragement to have interpersonal relationship with parents, peers, teachers and other adults for cognitive development.
- iii. Concrete operational stage (7-11 years). The child becomes more logical than in the pre-operational stage but relies so much on concrete objects for understanding.
- iv. Formal operational stage (11-15 years). This is a mature stage of development where a child is able to apply logical and abstract thinking to solve physical, social, mental and normal problems.

This theory gives direction on the quantity of information required for teaching and learning for a certain group of children to learn effectively, the methodology and experience that would be effective for a certain category of children. In the light of this, assessing early childhood education as a link to sustainable development in the twenty first century is presented.

Education for Sustainable Development in Early Years

Humanity is faced with problems locally, regionally and globally. This includes physical, societal and economic problems. The implication in terms of migration, increasing poverty, human health and security problems are extremely serious. The goals of UN continues to create programmes that will integrate the principles, values, and practices that will cause sustainable development (SD) into all aspects of education and learning (Oloo, 2022). Little and Green (2007) opined that the concept of sustainable development is the concept of 'need', particularly the essential needs of the world's poor, to which priority should be given and limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environmental ability to meet present and future needs.

Sen (2000) argued that Brundtland World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) which view sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs was 'illuminating but incomplete'. He argued that individuals should be seen as agents who can think and act and not patients whose needs had to be catered for. He went further to state that it is only by treating people as agent that they would ever be able to think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate and through this means, reshape the world (Sen, 2000). Therefore, sustainable development is redefined as development that promotes the capabilities of present people without compromising capabilities of future generations.

By implication, human beings should not be seen merely as people who have needs but as those who are capable of initiating actions that would bring solution to their problems. This also suggests that sustainability is not automatic and may be effective if the young children are taught how to live a sustainable life in their formative years. Similarly, Schumacher (1999) argued that 'Development does not start with goods, it starts with people and their education, organization and discipline. Without these three, all resources remain latent, untapped potential. Education is widely recognized as having a major role to play in the realization of the vision of sustainability (Thematic Group, 2015).

Agents Responsible for the Sustainability of Early Childhood Education

In early childhood, parents and children day to day activities significantly influence sustainable development at the level of consumption. Therefore, sustainable consumption is the most appropriate area to initially focus our attention in the early years. We must support parents and children acting together to live more sustainable lives. Therefore, what the children consume at early years should be the major concern of parents, teachers, government of nations and the society at large. High quality education intervention can combat poverty and improve the opportunity for children who may be at risk of the negative influence of illiteracy, poor feeding and lack of development. Recent research on the complex and rapid development of every young child's brain has given greater insight into the importance of early years.

Three Pillars of Early Development

Oloo (2022) referred to the three pillars of sustainability as social development, economic development and environmental protection as independent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development. Early educators have a challenge to develop educational systems, curriculum, and pedagogic practices that promote sustainable actions in accordance with the three pillars. Nonetheless, these three pillars are recommended to build up children who have the ability to refined thinking concerning matters affecting them. This will enable them not just to be consumers of solutions sought for them, but also producers of solutions that impact them (Akinsemolu and Ogunkoya, 2021; Oloo, 2022).

Education for Sustainable Development in the Early Years

Education for sustainable development provides a vision that seeks to balance human development, economic wellbeing, cultural traditions and respect for environment. This suggests that young children should develop a more critical appreciation of many of the most advanced products of science and technology, shifting from traditional approaches to modern practice. Education for sustainable development must have the potential to integrate and build up areas of curriculum development including features such as education, citizenship, peace education, multicultural and gender education, health and environment al education, media literacy. Education should be concerned with developing children's economic understanding in relation to national development (Akinsemolu and Ogunkoya, 2021).

The UN Convention on the rights of the child (1989) affirms that all children have the right to education and drafted an action plan for sustainable development drawn. The first priority is the promotion of basic primary education stressing the fact that children experience the greatest environmental challenges at the time when the foundation of many of their fundamental attitudes and values are first formed. From research and from experience, it is noted that even very young children are capable of sophisticated thinking in relation to socio-cultural and environmental issues, indicating that the earlier Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) ideas are introduced, the greater their impact and influence can be (Oloo, 2022).

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA, 2009) speaking on the right of the child affirm that children should be given the opportunity to be heard on all matters affecting them without discrimination on any grounds, encouraging children participation in all setting; within family, in the school and in the community. By implication, children need a sound literacy background to fully participate in the global community for their present and future development in all areas of endeavour needed for the wellbeing of the society for sustainable development.

It is imperative that Early Childhood Education be recognized as the starting point for lifelong learning within education for sustainability. This is because early childhood education offers a valuable and concrete starting point for sustainable development for all children. It is therefore, a matter of priority to create opportunities for all children to have access to it.

Introducing literacy skill of reading and writing at this stage also can be more rewarding as the child sails smoothly through this into adulthood for sustainability. According to Abiodun-Ekus and Onukaogu (2009), literacy is what causes people to interact with written text and in so doing interact with the local community and society, and account for complete development a child as an individual.

The Early Childhood Curriculum

Early childhood education has a tradition of integrated curriculum approaches embedded in children's everyday lives. Such approaches need to be more widely adopted into the formal curricula of schooling and into formal and non-formal.

Conclusion

Assessing early childhood education as a link to sustainable development in the twenty first century is presented. This review reveals that education is the foundation of sustainable development, and much of the work on education for sustainable development must be closely linked to the pursuit of education for all. Findings also show that education is a key instrument for bringing about changes in values attitudes, skills, behaviours and lifestyles consistent with sustainable development within and among countries. This in turn, develops children that are able to think not just about the present but also the future thereby

establishing sustainability. This study therefore, recommends that since early childhood and development is important for the successful and interesting nursery/primary school life of a child, policy makers, planners, stakeholders, parents and teachers should engage in campaign to publicize and intimate the public on the gains of early childhood education.

Additionally, curriculum planning should always take account of the children's interest as important aspect of personalized learning. Children should be given first hand experience to enhance the value of learning. Building upon particular interest and concerns express; pictures; video clips and objects can be used to find out what children already know and understand. Once the foundation for new knowledge and understanding are identified, children's awareness can be built on different social cultural contexts and experiences. Within the growing challenge of economy, environment and socio-cultural life, there is need to develop an effective education for sustainable development at all levels.

In all educational sectors, a major aim must be provision of appropriate curriculum to prepare young children of encounters in the future. Education for sustainable development requires programmes that emphasize the importance of providing learning experiences for teachers, parents and for children.

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