

Early Childhood Education and Care: Reliable Instrument for Achieving Social Justice in Nigeria

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Abstract

The private sector has regrettably dominated the provision of education for persons aged 0-5 otherwise called early childhood education and care, thereby making education in Nigeria at this level elitist and this portends great danger to even development and equality of access to education and other social goods in addition to constituting an affront to a state that claims it is committed to the pursuit of egalitarian and welfare policies for its citizens. Employing the philosophical methods, this paper focuses on the benefits of early childhood education and care and how the involvement of the government in its provisions can be a reliable platform for engineering and mounting a sustainable social justice system in Nigeria. The paper strongly maintains that through early childhood education and care, Nigeria can institute a sustainable social justice system where equality of access to education and other social goods can be guaranteed to all Nigerians in addition to Nigeria making positive commitments to changes in her body polity. The paper finally makes recommendations on ways forward for involving the Nigerian government in making social justice a reality through early childhood education and care.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care, social justice, equality, welfare, Nigeria, Private sector

Introduction

Any society that is genuinely committed to matching words with actions on issues of social justice or quality improvement in the quality of life of its citizens can consciously embrace early childhood education and care and consequently channel all such aspirations or dreams into it or in other words make early childhood education and care a spring board for achieving all such aspirations. This is because skills, values, attitudes and dispositions acquired during learning experiences at early childhood education and care centres make long lasting and durable impressions in the lives of learners later in life. This is why early childhood education and care is indispensable in any genuine drive for social justice.

As a development effort that is provided for learners in their early formative years, early childhood education and care helps in properly configuring and sharpening the personality, attitudes and value orientations of younger ones and this goes a long way in positively guiding the feelings and thought processes of young ones later in life. In fact it is self evident that human beings finds it impossible or extremely difficult to easily forget or discard habits and behaviours that had been norms they had acquired from infancy or childhood. As no one consciously learns to be left handed in old age, good behaviours that support and promote social justice that children learn or acquire during childhood or in early years of their development are likely to remain throughout the rest of their lives. Pragmatism and pragmatic philosophy expects a people who desire or aspire for a particular thing or change to make conscious efforts to kick start the introduction of such desirable dreams of theirs. Every development aspired by a people is usually started by the people themselves through their own conscious efforts by making the right investments in their citizens and the best investments in human beings for maximum results is that that starts very early with the young or infants of a state. This is where early childhood education and care is indispensable for Nigerian's long craving for social justice and improvement in the quality of lives of her citizens.

Early childhood education and care is beneficial in a number of ways. To the child, early childhood education and care exposes and prepares the child adequately for enhanced and improved academic performance later in life. Children who are exposed to early childhood education and care perform better than their contemporaries who go straight to the primary school at the conventional age approved by laws of the state. By strictly exposing the child to early childhood education and care, the aura of fear of the school that characterizes the behaviour of those who go straight to primary school is removed. A child who benefits from early childhood education and care acquires communication and social competences early in life in addition to acquiring hygienic, moral, civic and civil responsibilities that can combine to promote healthy moral, civic and civil responsibilities that can combine to promote healthy moral dispositions that are favourable to the promotion of democracy, justice and human rights for the individual and the state.

Learners whose parents and state provide opportunities to benefit from early childhood education and care acquire dispositions, knowledge and values that promote moral and humane virtues especially such moral concepts that Kaga (2008:53) calls "empathy, sharing, respect for other and love for nature". The development of these moral virtues in a learner early in life has the potential and capability to place such learners on a platform where they can acquire skills for contributing to the sustainable development of their society and institutions

early in life. Early childhood education and care is also beneficial to the learner as he or she starts early in life to understand those issues that cause terrible disarticulations that in addition to threatening the social and national environment also pose threats to present and future generations.

Awareness of and early knowledge of these agents of disarticulation can afford citizens opportunities to avoid the repeat of such behaviours that led to the emergence of such environment disarticulating and life threatening behaviours. This is important as the emphasis at the early childhood education and care level is always on the development of basic skills that support sustainable growth later in life including critical thinking where the understanding and appreciation of who suffers the long lasting effects of the various actions, inactions, decisions and indecisions of the state and its institutions are also not neglected. The point is that early childhood education and care is good for the learner because it develops the thinking faculty and consequently equips him with the capacity to think logically, reflectively and creatively in addition to instilling in him behavioural norms that support the defense of his interests and those that make case for intergenerational justice and equity. In fact, adequate development of critical thinking skills in learners at the early childhood education and care stages is always associated with placing early childhood learners on the front banner to appreciate that they, the young ones can suffer more of the detrimental consequences of the unsustainable behaviours of their predecessors, hence the onus to strive for right actions or to get things in their right perspectives lie with them in the form of speaking out their feelings and this is a core behaviour that early childhood education and care develops in learners.

Parents are also beneficiaries of early childhood education and care. The existence of early childhood education and care institutions affords working parents the opportunities to continue in their normal works or business days or weeks after delivery. This means the stress of caring for babies is removed from mothers and transferred to the early childhood education and care institutions and the fear of deferring pregnancy or aborting it due to the fear of losing one's employment or business is adequately taken care of because of the availability of early childhood education and care institutions.

Early childhood education and care institutions create employment opportunities for the teeming adult population who are engaged in early childhood education institutions. This is in addition to early childhood education and care stimulating interests for researches in education at the levels of teaching methodology, application of technology and infrastructure and providing insights on patterns of development or social interactions of learners at this level of education or the behavioural patterns of parents whose children are in early childhood education and care institutions. Global interests in early childhood education have brought about the breaking of new frontiers of knowledge in the areas of pedagogy and curriculum as well as the role of social economic variables, environment and play in promoting and enhancing teaching and learning or inhibiting teaching and learning and the cumulative effects of all these research efforts at the early childhood education and care levels have implications for education in the form of adding quality and laying foundations for new directions to educational theory and practice across the other tiers of the education system.

The state is not left out in the benefits that early childhood education and care can trigger for the national development of states, whether developed, developing underdeveloped. According to Nwaokugha (2016:204) "a state that consciously makes care and education of children at childhood stage a national priority is clearly and un-mistakenly working towards equalization of educational opportunities, building platforms for achieving its identified national objectives and making social justice an achievable norm". In fact, any state that offers all its young ones opportunities to go through early childhood education and care has divinely planted into its citizens the genes that can blossom into positive attitudinal dispositions that can trigger development across all sectors of the individual and national lives of the state. Responsible states exploit the floodgate of opportunities that come with early childhood education and care by creating favourable environmental conditions in the form of humane public relations with citizens challenging themselves and responding by releasing their creative investment potentials. This development supports security of the future of citizens in addition to promoting mutual understanding between the state and its citizens hence encouraging private sector participation in early childhood education sector and this has inherent potential benefits in the forms of private investors assisting the state in providing and managing education at a level that the provision of education is very critical and fundamental. Most states in the world officially make provisions for early childhood education in their state policies but regrettably abandon this critical sector to private investors. Be this as it may, the exclusive participation of the private sector in early childhood education and care promises to boost manpower notably through employment and this on its own has the capacity to add quality to the economy of states through tax on workers and premises of investors in the sector.

The foregoing shows or makes a serious revelation namely that early childhood education and care is a fundamental necessity for any people or any state that aspires to be great and on the basis of the greatness that comes to a people or a state through early childhood education and care. This paper intends to open a new frontier or lead to a new direction that Nigeria can exploit so as to attain greatness through early childhood education and care and the new direction is to demonstrate how early childhood education and care can be a

reliable instrument for achieving social justice in Nigeria.

Precisely, the philosophical research methodology will be strictly adopted. A research methodology is said to be philosophical when a researcher consciously employs speculation, analysis and prescription (Nwaokugha and Danladi (2016) Nwaokugha and Abiakwu 2017). Speculation as a philosophical research method attempts to find logical coherence in an entire realm of thought (Aminigo 1994, Agulana, 2011). Analysis as a philosophical research method hinges on critical examination of words, concepts and propositions with the aim of clarifying or making explicit all possible meanings associated with such words, concepts and propositions while prescription establishes standards for judging values or making prescriptive value judgements.

As a tradition in the philosophical research method is to start with the clarification of key concept, we therefore start with the concept of early childhood education and care.

Early childhood education and care

What is globally known as early childhood education and care is a conglomeration or blanket term under which one finds such other concepts such as crèche, day care, pre-nursery, nursery, pre-primary, headstart, kindergarten (Kiebel, 1996, Nwaokugha 2016). A common denominator that unites all that happens in the crèche, day care, pre-nursery, nursery, pre-primary, headstart and kindergarten or precisely childhood education and care centers is that all such centers target providing young people between the ages of 0-5 some measures of learning experiences before the age in which they can enroll into the primary school. In other words it is learning experience that is meant for learners below the age officially prescribed by law for them to be enrolled into the primary school. It is possible the multiplicity of names for educational provisions at this level can warrant different states to adopt different names for educational provisions for their citizens at this level even when the target and what they do can be one and the same thing. This observation may account for why Nwaokugha (2016: 244) writes that some states simply refer to educational provisions for the young before their official enrolment into the primary school as pre-primary education and one state in this category or where this happens is Nigeria. According to the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004:11) pre-primary education “is the education given in an educational institution prior to entering primary school” and the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) maintains that the purpose of education at this level shall be to:

- a. Effect a smooth transition from the home to the 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 the farms, the market, 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 with toys etc
- f. Develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit
- g. Learn good habits, especially good health habits, and
- h. Learn the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play.

From all the above one can say that the overriding aim of providing educational opportunities for learners prior to their enrolment into the primary school is to engage them in a variety of learning and developmental experiences that can adequately prepare them to make all the necessary adjustments or initiate smooth transition to the primary school and depending on the quality of personnel entrusted with this responsibility and the robust and vibrant nature of the experiences learners go through, learners in early childhood education and care centres can show relative improvements in such social competence as numeracy and language skills, hygiene and other areas of personal development. It is important one points out that care and education are two basic things that are given priority in efforts to provide learning experiences to learners in early childhood learning institutions. However, despite the priority that is given to care and education in early childhood learning experiences or despite their closeness in educational experiences for the young, the two terms apply at different times, with care coming first and education coming later.

Care as a component of early childhood learning experience begins from the ages of 0-3 years and basically focuses on giving or providing protection, security and keeping the learner away from harm or safe from danger or injury. This is in addition to guiding and assisting learners into developing hygienic and sanitary habits for their personal cleanliness and daily upkeep (Nwaokugha 2016). Because care is as presented, Hayes (2007) writes that care is custodian in tone and nature. On the other hand, education within the frame of mind of early childhood learning experiences revolves around all experiences that are provided to the learner between 4 and 5 that targets enhancing and promoting continuous learning in the individual in addition to enabling the individual indulge and creatively participate in abstract and critical thinking so as to respond to the problems of his or her environment.

The observations above are instructive and can compel one to agree with Gibbons (2007) who seems to have placed the two terms in a hierarchy when he noted that care is inferior to education in the context of early

childhood learning experiences and many reasons accounts for this. The caregiver hardly goes to school or hardly possesses any qualification or credentials that can qualify him to practice and his trade can more or less be likened to a behaviour or trade one can naturally pick up just as women are naturally endowed with skills to care for children. The above remarks about care are not the same thing about education in the context of early childhood learning experiences, for the educator must undergo rigorous professional training so as to be equipped with the rudimentary proficiencies and other requisite skills that can enable him to perform effectively.

Social Justice

Social justice as a concept is definitionally complex and its definitional complexity notwithstanding, social justice is one concept that scholars, politicians, the clergy, nongovernmental organizations and others that make human welfare a priority are favourably disposed to, partly “because it is broad enough to include a number of important social, welfare (i.e. healthcare, education, employment, housing, pensions/human rights issues) (Fernandez, Hansing and de Rojas 2008:2). That social justice is broad enough as indicated above is one reason why the concept can be employed in the discussion of many issues and topic across societies and why it yields itself to a plurality or plethora of definitions, interpretations and applications.

In the course of this paper, definition of social justice, justifications for social justice, priority which social justice receives as well as the definitional complexity of social justice will be highlighted. Fernandez, Hansing and de Rojas (2008) write that there is a consensus on three main normative definitions of social justice which include:

1. The distribution of goods and services through state sponsored social welfare programmes
2. Economic justice through access and equal opportunities
3. Political rights and liberties

Aminigo and Nwaokugha (2011:170) seem to be in agreement with the above scholars when they write that social justice “demands ethical considerations in policy formulation and implementation, resource use and distribution etc so much that intergenerational equity and fairness can be sustained between regions and generations”. Social justice in its simplest conception is any welfare policy put up by a state for the improvement of the quality of lives of the citizens of the state. Welfare of citizens of the state can come up in any form ranging from attempts of a state to make such things as equality and freedom norms that citizens can exploit for their individual emancipation and development to providing conducive environment in the form of making available infrastructural, legal, social, educational, economic, political and other necessary conditions, which upon their effective utilization and exploitation, citizens of a state irrespective of their sex, age, tribe, religion, region, status can through their own efforts achieve what Aminigo and Nwaokugha (2011) call their maximum potential for their personal development and the development of the state.

What has been said above directly points in the direction that social justice is all about policy or the degree of responsiveness of a state in terms of practical, workable and humane policies for her citizens. It is believed that the attempt of the state to formulate humane, practical workable policies for the welfare of its citizens may be in recognition of the state’s awareness of the monumental and colossal existence of hardship, injustice and inequalities in the state and in such state where this awareness has come to the knowledge of the general public, the state makes conscious efforts to institute policies that can improve the quality of lives of the citizens through the establishment of favourable policies that the citizens can exploit on their own. Building social justice argument or discourse around providing the enabling environment upon which citizens of a state can exploit for their individual and collective development or empowerment is basically necessary and in the interests of the state because no state, no matter the level of its developmental sophistication can single handedly and conveniently provide all the things that her citizens need for their survival and development (Nwaokugha, 2012, 2014). This is where one is in agreement with and can applaud Karmel, al-Batran and Hassainy (2014:5) for their remark when they write that the foundations of social justice “provides a rubric through which we can formulate maxims for a just society and thus identify existing injustice in the society and work towards rectifying it”.

One obvious feature of social justice is that it first makes case for citizens from their state and secondly from citizens to their states. What is implied here is that the state makes quality investments in the citizens through the enactment of humane and workable policies for the development of the citizens which the state later can harness or exploit for its own development. This reciprocity is there because citizens are the carrier of the genes that blossom into development and the quality of development that the state makes in the citizens will determine or replicate itself in the quality of development that can be visible in the state.

Ideally, a concept that makes case for improvement in the quality of life of a people or citizens of a state should be embraced boldly and whole-heartedly to the chest with two hands but there seems to be a paradox or reservation in the case of social justice. That paradox or reservation is that governments of states that are good as well as those that are bad lay claim to the fact that social justice norms and principles guide and provide frameworks for all that they do. Good governments by the conception of this writer and especially within the framework of social justice are those that have evolved and continuously evolve humane policies for the

emancipation and development of their citizens while bad governments are those that exist without putting in place measures for the advancement and emancipation of their citizens. The inclinations to the pursuit of social justice by both developmentally conscious or development oriented states and the non development oriented states blur the meaning of social justice to the point of making the concept very obscure. Because social justice is as presented above makes Reisch (2002:343) to observe that “the concept of social justice is now used as a rationale for maintaining the status quo, promoting far-reaching social reforms and justifying revolutionary actions”. What this seems to suggest is that people and institutions of varied philosophical and ideological dispositions claim that their actions and philosophical underpinning or leanings have direct bearings with social justice or is deep rooted in the promotion and projection of the ideals of social justice. Even when such persons institutions, and their ideological leanings do not have anything to do with social justice.

Consequently social justice can be an enigma and to be expected of an enigmatic concept like social justice can be constant changes in its interpretation and application, split second complexity both in the ideas it tends to represent or stands for and its application in responding or solving problems of the society. Because social justice manifests all the above, Reisch (2002) writes that social justice is conflict-ridden.

Whichever way it goes, there is a common denominator that all persons and institutions that lay claims to social justice share in common and this is that both scholars that maintain that social justice is used to maintain social status, promote far-reaching social reforms as well as the justification of revolutionary actions recognize that social justice is deep rooted in human welfare or human well being and these scholars hold fast on the position that any society that ignores or neglects human well being or human welfare has lost the essential ingredients or condiments that stimulate and promote harmonious living and consequently cannot effectively boost of economic, political and moral conditions that promote social and human flourishing. However it is important one notes that the point at which scholars who associate social justice with the maintenance of status quo differ from the others is in the area of equality that some scholars associate social justice with. The group of scholars that associate social justice with the maintenance of status quo upholds class distinction as essential for the effective functioning of the society and their argument hinges on the premise that “unequal should be treated unequally” and the implication of this is that social justice cannot and should not be a platform for the transformation or vacating of existing structures into a classless society rather existing structure should be preserved and left untouched. The important thing here is that social justice should be for all and not to the detriment or disadvantage of those in the upper class of the society.

The above expositions on social justice are for purposes of providing adequate background information on the concept especially its adaptability or employability to different situations, attention will now be shifted on how early childhood education and care can be a reliable instrument for achieving social justice in Nigeria.

Achieving social justice in Nigeria through Early childhood education and care

Education in its entirety is a social good that targets public good and social justice by its nature also targets public good. With both concepts targeted at public good, any rational thinker can easily conclude that education and social justice travel on the same road and are good bed fellows or that the use of education especially early childhood education and care can be a reliable route or platform for achieving social justice in Nigeria. States where those at the helm of its affairs accord topmost priority to investments in human capital and pursuit of vigorous welfare policies for the citizens can be commended. Justifications for investments in human capital development and pursuit of welfare policies are self-evident. Human beings are the carriers of the genes of development and the extent in which any state develops depends on the ability of that state to make the right investments in human beings who can initiate ideas that can make development possible or a reality as well as the extent in which citizens can be provided with the enabling environment upon which to strive.

Any state that maximally invests in its human beings and has floated adequate welfare policies can be said to have consciously instituted a social justice policy and one sure way that can guarantee and sustain effective enjoyment of any social justice policy in the forms of human capital development and welfare policy or programme put in place by any state is when a state through legislation and other state instruments and institutions make the provision of early childhood education and care a state priority.

There is no doubt that any state that makes the provision of early childhood education and care a state wide policy to all its citizens has consciously chosen to provide real and authentic equal educational opportunity and equal economic political, social and moral development to all her citizens. By the singular act of a state adopting early childhood education and care as a mechanism for social justice, such a state has made landmark achievements in social welfare issues as sons and daughters of the poor who ordinarily may not have had the opportunities of early childhood education and care and the benefits that come with it, can now avail themselves of the opportunities. This is where people and institutions who maintain that one effective way to construct a just, egalitarian, democratic and sustainable society is to focus attention on early childhood education and care, can be said to be one hundred percent correct.

Employing early childhood education and care as an instrument for human development, welfare and social

justice mechanism can lead a state into initiating a policy framework that catches all children in a state at the basic and fundamental thresholds that facilitate and fast-track the compulsory development of all the children in a state in say civil and civic skills or other priority areas that the state may deem fit and appropriate for the development of its citizens. Equally important is that the use of early childhood education and care for the promotion and pursuit of social justice can provide equal and plain level ground for all citizens to explore and exploit opportunities for the individual development of the individual citizen on one hand and equal opportunity for citizens to make their contributions to the development of their state.

Citizens of a state who are exposed to civic and civil skills in early childhood education and care programmes with the target of instituting social justice can be in better positions to, in addition to practicing what they were taught raise signposts for new directions on modalities for critiquing, analyzing and repositioning the practice of human development, welfare policies or social justice for effective results. In the same way a state that had made earlier investments in her citizens can be challenged to sustain such an investment and even navigate and explore other avenues for further progress so that its earlier investments cannot be a waste.

It is possible one points out that beginning a state's quest for social justice through early childhood education and care provisions can provide solid empowerment and enablement for both the citizens and the state. It is not to be doubted that a social justice or welfare policy a citizen receives in his or her early childhood education and care, can following Nwaokugha (2012) equip him or her with the mental and intellectual capabilities that can enable him or her function well in further academic pursuit, trade, business or show expertise in entrepreneurial skills, in the event of the citizen not continuing with academics. This means that any enabling background the state provides for her citizens early in life can be a ladder with which the citizens can use to achieve and actualize their potentials later in life. Just like any specific practice a child or learner grows up with can make indelible impressions in the psyche of the person throughout his or her life time. Consequently harping on the gospel of catch young, the Nigerian state can achieve monumental success in her endeavours to make social justice a norm when such efforts and endeavours are targeted at through early childhood education and care where the Nigerian state can make conscious efforts in meeting its own statutory obligations through providing the enabling environment with which it can tailor or direct the tender mind of the Nigeria child to the directions that the Nigerian state deems appropriate for the individual development of the Nigerian child and the collective development of the Nigerian state. The present practice where states plan social justice later in life when citizens have terribly derailed or states instruct citizens to rely whole-heartedly on government without government putting up any concrete practical and workable plan is deceitful and calls for a thorough re-examination and thorough analytic scrutiny.

Despite the promise of education particularly early childhood education and care in achieving human capacity development and welfare policy that can lead to social justice, the case of Nigeria in this direction is different. Nigeria is one country that claims to have absolute faith in education as instruments par-excellence in achieving national development (FGN 2004) and initiating social policies that can be beneficial to individual citizens and the state but its commitment to this declaration is doubtful and far from reality as educational provisions to the most sensitive segment of her population (citizens from 0-5 years of age) is absolutely neglected or is in the hand of the private sector. In other words, the Nigerian state consciously avoided direct participation in the provision of early childhood education and care and this is a serious challenge to a country that declares it is committed to equality of educational opportunities and to use education as a platform for transforming the Nigerian society. The point one is making is not that there are no early childhood education and care centres but that the sector is exclusively dominated by the private sector ranging from religious bodies to interested individual and cooperate institutions with the government of Nigeria only performing supervisory and oversight functions. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2004:11) admits and acknowledges this when it writes that:

The responsibility of the government for pre-primary education shall be to promote the training of qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable curriculum, supervise and control the quality of such institutions and establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools.

In what seems to be a quick condemnation of the attitudes of the Nigerian Government to pre-primary education, Asodike and Abdulrahman (2013:343) write that:

Issues related to early childhood education in Nigeria at present is not appreciated as a national responsibility. There is no gainsaying the fact that Government has not demonstrated a serious commitment to education of children between the ages of 0-3 years and 3-5 years.

The implications of the actions of the Nigerian government not to participate in early childhood education and care and the exclusive participation of the private sector in early childhood education and care in Nigeria need adequate and thorough analysis to determine whether such actions are to the benefits ordetriment of the

Nigerian state. That early childhood education and care as the first conscious learning and educative experience that some states provide or make available to their citizens is, without gainsaying credited with laying robust and vibrant foundations for lifelong learning experiences in addition to being the hub for building a sustainable society as well as playing a role in constructing and reconstructing a sustainable society (Samuelsson and Kaga 2008) do not require any mirror or microscope to ascertain or confirm its truth as citizens of a state whose state avails or makes opportunities for them to go through early childhood learning experiences develop sound intellectual, emotional, psychological and social dispositions that enhance and facilitate their general development and maturity as well as the acquisition of axiological, metaphysical and epistemological behaviours that support and promote sustainable development

By availing states opportunities to expose their citizens as indicated above, states can use opportunities made available by early childhood education and care to sensitize and conscientize their citizens in the directions the state may deem appropriate for its sustainable development and this can be said to be in harmony with the biblical or scriptural injunctions which states “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). With what has been said above, it is right to say that early childhood education and care has potentials to be advantageous to the moral health of a state and its citizens.

One can in all sense of purpose and sincerity acknowledge the involvement and participation of the private sector in early childhood education and care as “one of a rescue mission whose principal origin derives from the failure or inability of the state to deliver” (Nwaokugha 2015:72). Also it has to be stated loud and clear that the private sector got involved in the business of education especially at the early childhood education and care level due to Nigerian government’s total neglect and disregard of the sector and consequently strives to create awareness about the potentials of the sector through enhanced access to the sector as well as promote the enjoyment of citizens rights to education especially for learners at the ages of 0-5 years and more importantly

... the desire to bring back quality, introduce innovations, create alternative choices for parents and learners, re-engineer moral consciousness and sensitivity among learners and to challenge the state to live up to its responsibilities in terms of the development of human and material resources that God generously endowed Nigeria with... private sector participation in education is in keeping with the economic, political and social status of most Nigerian parents, especially those parents who have attained enviable positions/status and would want same for their sons and daughters (Nwaokugha, 2015:73)

No doubts, Nigerians have welcome the participation of the private sector in education especially at the early childhood education and care level with open hands, great ovation and joy and in an enigmatically paradoxical trend of events, the open hands, joy and ovation of Nigerians concerning the participation of the private sector in Nigeria’s early childhood education and care programmes is short lived and disappointing as such learning centres are opened and operated without the least basic infrastructural facilities that can stimulate creativity and intellectual curiosity in learners at such levels. What seems to be a fall out of this terrible deficit in the participation of the private sector in early childhood education and care in Nigeria is that the globally recognized the goals and objectives of early childhood education and care such as equity and equality of educational opportunity have been terribly and disastrously compromised and more and more compromises are recorded especially in this period of economic recession in the forms of more early childhood education and care centres springing up in dilapidated structures and other structures not meant for the purposes in which they are presently being used hence they terribly and disastrously lack the serenity and intellectual spirit expected of early childhood education and care centres.

This is not to say that there are no good and quality early childhood education and care learning centres in Nigeria but the fact is that those that meet the globally accepted standards for early childhood education and care centres are few and because of this admission into quality early childhood education and care centres has become elitist that only the rich can afford for their sons and daughters. Again discrepancies in terms of quality early childhood education and care and non-quality early childhood education and care centres exist and still continue at the levels of teachers who teach in early childhood education and care institutions in Nigeria. The few well established early childhood education and care centres with the state of the art facilities that can favourably compete with anyone in the world recruit quality teachers even when all are not professionally trained but teacher quality in mushroom early childhood education and care institutions that litter streets and corners in Nigeria is monumentally regrettable and in fact a twist in this development that is like a blessing in disguise is that the participation of the private sector in providing education at the early childhood level has become a gold mine for revenue generation by the government whose only interest is in the taxes the owners of such schools pay and not in the quality of teachers and the quality of instruction they provide to knowledge thirsty Nigerians. It is also on record that the mushroom early childhood learning centres have become employment destinations for Nigerians who according to Nwaokugha (2015:79) “claim they attended universities or any post-secondary

educational institutions but never had certificates”.

It is important one points out that the interest in any innovations particularly in education is the utilitarian value in terms of the number of persons who can qualitatively benefit from such educational innovations. In the case of the participation of the private sector in early childhood education and care, their participation has further polarized the Nigerian society to the point of any keen observes envisaging and widened the possibilities of social and security problems, in addition to their participation devaluing and desecrating the teaching profession and the quality of instruction that unfortunately the majority of the early childhood education and care centres provide to the knowledge thirsty Nigerians. With what has been said above, it is right to say that early childhood education and care in Nigeria and the manner in which it is provided has potentials to be elitist and consequently not provided to qualitatively serve the interests of the majority of Nigerians hence it is detrimental to the propagation of the ideals of social justice.

Conclusion

Globally, it is a fact that education both in theory and in practice is targeted at individual and public good of the members of the society that practices it and this makes education a concept or a social practice upon which responsible states and their representatives focus state policies for purposes of introducing changes and innovations that target improving the quality of lives of a people. The mission and vision statement of states in this direction is usually to structure education in forms that it responds to being used in solving, resolving and responding to the problems of members of the state. Because education is basically and fundamentally used by the state in repositioning itself for welfare and egalitarian policies or measures for members of the state makes education an instrument and institution for achieving social justice.

What has been said above points in the direction that there is a strong link between education and social justice and in fact more than any other instrument and institution of the state, education generally and early childhood education and care stands out and promises to be the surest sustainable way for achieving and making social justice a real norm of the state. This paper has made this case by extensively discussing early childhood education and care and the numerous benefits children, parents and the Nigerian state can derive from it when a state like Nigeria that is in dare need of development makes provision of early childhood education and care compulsory as one of its own strategies for instituting social justice or making social justice a norm in Nigeria.

As a concept whose epistemological boundaries keeps widening, in addition to being redefined in novel forms, social justice is possible through early childhood education and care and can have potentials that can lead the way into identifying and correcting previously ignored and unidentified social injustices and marginalization that have stagnated the development of Nigeria in addition to threatening its national security and by so doing raise new signposts that can lay new foundations for a new beginning that can translate into genuine human and national development where all the ethnic groups can have genuine sense of belonging. Social justice through education generally and early childhood education and care in particular can create awareness in the forms of redirecting the thinking of Nigerians that the best stage to start a workable or pragmatic equal education opportunity for all regions in the Nigerian state is at this level and not the current practice where attempts are made to equalize educational opportunity at the university level. All these are possible because social justice when rightly implemented functions as guide to egalitarian policy actions for quality improvement and quality change bearing in mind that any state that makes social justice a norm through early childhood education and care has consciously, rightly and unmistakably laid foundations for equality in access to social goods for all its citizens and on the other hand has made a commitment for positive changes in her body polity. Making early childhood education and care compulsory, affordable and a right every child in Nigeria should enjoy can help to create platforms upon which social justice can strive and through this way engineer a revolution that can disrupt, alter and challenge injustice and inequity that are fast becoming norms in the Nigerian society. On the other hand, a cradle to grave that can be ignited for the empowerment, liberation and conscientization of Nigerians and consequently fast track Nigeria's national development when early childhood education and care is made a national priority.

There are practical steps that can be taken to ensure that all we have theorized come to fruition. The government of Nigeria can match words with actions by compulsorily attaching early childhood education and care centres to existing public primary schools across the length and breadth of Nigeria so that Nigerians who cannot afford the high cost of early childhood education and care under its present provision by the private sector can benefit from this all important, basic and fundamental phase in the development of the child. Or alternatively the government of Nigeria can stand by its words by not directly investing in the sector but can accept to financial bills of every Nigerian child who enrolls in early childhood education and care operated by the private sector. Whether the Nigerian government accept the option or not, it should put adequate machinery in place to effectively regulate and effectively supervise what goes on in the private sector dominated early childhood education and care sector of Nigeria's educational system so that her investments in the forms of compulsorily enrolling and compulsorily financing the bills of every Nigerian child in the sector cannot amount to a

monumental and colossal waste. Nigeria cannot miss all the benefits that come with early childhood education and care especially its potentials in establishing social justice and the right step is to initiate actions now.

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