



## Early child care and peace building among pre- schoolers in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Peace building is germane in the contemporary society, against the spate of insecurity witnessed in the society in recent times. In any conflict, strife or unstable situation, children are vulnerable and negatively impacted with the result that they are exposed to increased risk of malnutrition, physical disability and psychosocial threats. They also lack the opportunity to early care, learning and simulation. Peace building in the society will ensure that a true and egalitarian society is built where individuals live with a sense of safety and quietness. The early childhood education is the right platform where the peace-building strategies are inculcated, which will ensure that, beginning from an early stage, individuals in the society live with the consciousness of building and maintaining peaceful relationships in the society. The benefits accruable from the peace building strategies in the early childhood education will make it imperative that peace building be integrated in to early childhood care and education to further intensify and consolidate peace and security skills of young children.

**Keywords:** early childhood education, peace building, preschoolers, peace education

### Introduction

Care and education in early years are aimed at engendering a holistic development of the child for later years of life. In Nigeria, this mandate is entrusted with the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme through a conscious implementation of the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development. The policy formulation is predicated on the assumption that exposure of children to rich, high-quality experiences during their formative years will result in improved learning outcomes. Thus, high quality early care and education help to boost children with the skills they require to succeed in both school and the larger society. With insecurity increasingly manifesting in various forms, the peace in Nigeria, as a political entity, appears threatened. While security is the duty of all and sundry, it will be worthwhile to inculcate skills to build the peace in young children so that they grow with such into adulthood. It is on this premise that this paper explores ways of peace building among pre-school children in Nigeria. Discussions will center on the following:

- Early child care and Education (ECE)
- Objectives of Early care and Education
- Peace education
- Peace building
- Link between early care and peace building
- Strategies to inculcate peace building in young children.

### Early child care and education (ECE)

Early childhood Education (ECE) is occasioned by the immature and sensitive nature of children as they develop from one stage to the other. Hence, it occurs when the child is below the age of six years, which is the statutory age for primary education (FRN, 2013). This period is critical because it is characterized by rapid growth and development, and curiosity. The child's development of social and cognitive skills as well as moral outlook and self-esteem are established during these years. Early childhood education offers high quality developmentally appropriate

pre- school experiences that addresses the socio-emotional, physical and cognitive needs of the child. In Nigeria, ECE is implemented in creche, nursery, play stations and other pre-school facilities where the major focus is on learning through play by providing a hands-on, interactive atmosphere where children learn about themselves through playing with their peers.

A quality early childhood care and education will not only empower children with social and communication skills, but also gives them better learning skills that can aid them succeed throughout their lifetime. Therefore, ECE, is a conscious and deliberate effort to develop young children in the different domains of development. In each of these domains of life, development is inter- dependent and inter-related such that no domain supercedes the other. Development in early childhood is largely a product of interaction between the child and the environment.

The objectives of Early Child care and Education in Nigeria are as follows:

- a. Provide care and support that will ensure the rights of the child to:
  - Good nutrition and health
  - Healthy and safe environment
  - Psycho-social stimulation
  - Protection and participation
- b. Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- c. Prepare the children for the primary level of education;
- d. Provide adequate care, supervision and security for the children while their parent are at work;
- e. Inculcation social, moral norms and values;
- f. Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and the use of toys, etc;
- g. Develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit;
- h. Stimulate in the child good habits, including good health habits; and
- i. Teach the rudiments of numbers; letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play.

The attainment or achievement of the above stated objectives is primarily rested on the activities of government approved ECE centers. One major activity in these centers is implementation of the ECE curriculum which is integrated in nature. An integrated curriculum is one that places premium on the necessity of making clear connection between learning experiences in an educational environment and children's whole lives; including their experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Vikoo (2016) opined that it is an attempt to provide a patterned relationship between the content of the curriculum and daily live experiences and activities. Thus, using the integrated curriculum approach, pre-school caregivers can relate children's classroom experience to their lives, both in classroom and outside of it.

### **Peace education**

With the increasing spate of insecurity and conflict, it has become imperative to inculcate in Nigeria's young children and those all over the world, the virtues of oneness, co-operation and unity (Okujagu, 2015) <sup>[7]</sup>. Peace education has been brought to the fore in this paper because peace building cannot be discussed in isolation from peace education, for the former is a subset of the latter. Peace education is an index of education through which individuals recognize, deal with and initiate alternatives to violence (Gamut, 2012) <sup>[4]</sup>. Harris & Morrison (2013) <sup>[5]</sup> stated that peace education is a process of creating awareness and consciousness to learners against the effects of violence by affording them the enablement to learn and acquire skills, through formalized teachings to manage conflicts in a non-violent manner and encouraging them to settle for peace whenever faced with situations of disagreement (conflict).

During conflicts and insecurity situations, children and women are more vulnerable (during and after the incidences). Normally, government will invoke its constitutional powers to check these crisis situations, and these have resulted to short term benefits.

For a long-term benefit to suffice, indigenes, citizens, residents, or nationals of these conflict and insecurity prone areas need some awareness and consciousness through formal education to identify types and areas of conflict and how these can be managed with minimal or no human and materials losses. Learning and development of peace and security skills, will, therefore, help to engender a culture of peace and security among pre-school children.

UNESCO (2001) <sup>[13]</sup> sets the objective of peace education as understanding of the manifestation of violence, the development of capabilities to respond constructively to that violence and specific knowledge of alternatives to violence. This objective sets the agenda for the need to development peace skills among children in various preschool programmes and facilities in Nigeria.

### **Peace Building**

Peace building as a concept is amorphous, for it has no specific guideline, but encompasses all the processes whose activities are related to reducing direct and indirect violence. Direct violence is the physical or psychological harm caused by individuals, and indirect violence refers to systematic social injustice, oppression and discrimination through legal, political, cultural, social and economic structures. However, peace does not just mean the absence of violence, but also extends to the active promoting of harmony which

emphasizes the development of an effective infrastructure to drive and sustain social justice, health care and economic development. It is in this wise that the UNDP. (2007) defines peace building as a range of measures aimed at reducing the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels of conflict management, and laying the foundation for sustainable peace and development. In a related dimension, peace building are measures designed to consolidate peaceful relations and similarly strengthening viable political, socio-economic and cultural institutions capable of handling conflict, as well as to consolidate other mechanisms that either create or support the atmosphere for sustained peace (Brabant, 2010).

Since the past few years, Nigeria has experienced, and still is experiencing, a decline in peacefulness. This can be attributed to increase in insecurity, instability and violent conflicts in communities, states and across the borders. In any conflict, strife or unstable situation, children are vulnerable and negatively impacted with the result that they are exposed to increased risk of malnutrition, physical disability and psychosocial threats. They also lack the opportunity to early care, learning and stimulation.

Thus, conflict has a debilitating effect on the well-being of young children (UNHCR, 2011). In order to safeguard and uphold the rights of young children in times of conflict, it is important that peace building initiatives and the concomitant variables be adopted. This role can be played by families, teachers and caregivers.

### **Rationale for integrating peace building in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE)**

UNICEF (2010) <sup>[11]</sup> posits that a quality early childhood development is a strong predictor of quality development of individuals at adulthood. The reason is that early childhood period is the most sensitive in the development of humans and is characterized by rapid changes in the brain architecture of an individual. Going by this, therefore, an early childhood care and education programme opens a window of opportunities as the period is ideal to facilitate positive interactions within the environment to explore holistic development of the child.

ECE creates a platform for a stable, nurturing and stimulating environment for young children in the communities and beyond. Thus, a unique and promising avenue is provided for families to refocus attention and priorities on children and their well-being. Early years lay the foundation for skills development in children and these skills includes those required for co-operation, peaceful negotiation of conflicts, and regulation of impulsive behaviours and application of logic to some new situations.

The benefits accruable from all these have made it imperative that peace building be integrated in to early childhood care and education to further intensify and consolidated peace and security skills of young children, among the development of other skills.

### **Early Childhood Care and Peace Building**

Early childhood years are considered the prime period for brain development which can affect a child's social capacities, critical to preconditions necessary for peace. Thus, if peace education is integrated into early childhood experiences, it can cause an improvement in building a child's later capacity for peace such as empathy, emotional

regulation and behavioural control which are seen as important (Alfonso, 2014) <sup>[1]</sup>. Giving the rationale for integrating peace building into early childhood care and education, the link between the former and the latter can be established by a review of some theories that are derived from a synthesis of human development theories such as behaviourism, cognitive, psychoanalytic, social learning and ecological theories.

### **Human development changes theory**

This theory explains that changes of attitude, behavior and skills in society can occur if the seeds of sustainable peace are cultivated from the early stages of the cycle of life. The quality of early experiences impact on acquisition of fundamental skills and cognitive development which in turn engenders optimal processing of complex information and with behaviours that demonstrates social competences and emotions stability (SECD, 2007).

The foundation of social skills such as empathy, friendliness, acceptance, compassion and ability to regulate emotions and inhibit impulsive behavior, are deep rooted in the early years of life. These skills are at the core of peace building. As a result, conscious efforts or initiatives to address divisive mindset, violent and impulsive actions must commence with young children.

### **Psychological and emotional change theory**

This theory proposes that in satisfying the emotional needs of children and their caregivers, the psychological causes of conflict and violence such as insecurity and victimization can also be addressed. Young children develop in an environment of relationship, and so are exposed to different kinds of adversities in the absence of nurturing and responsive caregiving. This can further activate the body's stress response system, which can cause a disruption in brain development and cause anxiety levels to rise. The consequence of this is inability to learn and interact socially with others. Furthermore, the theory postulates that careers who feel depressed, stressed or isolated will need early simulation and parenting programmes to enable them engage in interactions that can improve their mood and enhance well-being.

In other words, when caregivers feel more connected to, responsible for and invested in the development of young children, they are less likely to direct energies to socially destabilizing activities. This will in turn result to being more able to do what is needful for young children.

### **Roots Cause and Justices Theory**

This theory believes that violence is a result of social and economics inequalities, systematic oppression and injustices, and that if these factors are addressed, then the more equitable, harmonious, peaceful and socially just societies can develop. The initiation of ECE facilities and programme will help create a platform for early learning and human capital development. This will in turn bring about improvement in school enrolment, retention and completion. In addition, ECE initiatives that target families, do also ignite social changes in communities by providing opportunities for adult relationships to flourish across ethnic and socio-economic boundaries. This will ultimately support

the acquisition of social capital among members of different groups.

By providing opportunities for learning and skill development for groups that are hitherto marginalized and excluded, ECE programmes promotes creation of more inclusive and just societies, where everyone believes that they have a stake in shaping development of the next generation, and then works cohesively and consciously towards achieving this goal.

A deliberate and systematic convergence of these three theories of change in early childhood care and education programmes can mitigate different forms of violence among young children and in the country, at large. Synthesizing these theories in early childhood education will enhance peace building in the children.

### **Strategies to integrate peace building into ECE programs**

Peace building initiatives in early care centers are not, and should not only be targeted to contain conflict and violence as when these occur, but needed to be taken to the level of preventing drivers likely to manifest as conflict and violence. In line with the above stated, some strategies to integrate peace building into ECE programme are highlighted as follows:

#### **Provision of play and social interaction opportunities for young children.**

Play holds the way to the development of motor and cognitive skills as well as personality and talents of children. Owing to this reason, the play-based methodology of teaching has been recommendation for use in care centers. Play also has been entrenched as a right for children in the Child's Rights Act. The reasons for these actions are very obvious. Play, especially when it is unstructured and creative, reduces tension and aggressive behaviours in children. It also subdues the feeling of fear and sadness, and children find comfort and value in what they are doing as play (Okujagu, 2015) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Children play individually and in groups. Individual plays can aid creative exploration of the environment, and during group play they can practice negotiating differences collectively, exercise control and inhibit violent behaviours as they learn rules of the game. Play provides opportunities for caregivers and young children to development attachment, which improves their well-being. Similarly, play deepens the social interaction between children and their peers as well as between caregivers and young children.

Socially competent children, according to Monks (2006), may stand a better chance to be able to identify a victimized peer and his distress and possibly help and defend others from being victimized in instances of aggression and violence. Plays also increases functionality of children through the development of motor skills. As children play, in groups, they are afforded the opportunities to make friends with children from economic, ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups other than theirs. Children's play, therefore, serves as a melting pot for the development of different skills that are critical to peace building and establishment of bonds across different groups and boundaries.

### **Creation of opportunities for reflection, perspective taking and critical thinking**

When teaching young children, conscious effort should be made and opportunities created for them to address conflict in a non-violent manner. This can be achieved by teaching children to deliberately suppress responses that are violent or aggressive. These efforts and opportunities are further aided by reflection, perspective taking and critical thinking. By reflection, caregivers or teachers develop skills in children and encourage them to review the effectiveness of such skills still doing things the same old way. For example, reflecting on an encounter involving a conflict or disagreement, and then the use of just a three word statement – ‘I am sorry’.

Perspective taking is also an imperative, as this will enable children to understand thoughts, feelings, desires, dispositions, intentions and motivations of peers and others. This enables children to only sympathize but also empathize with peers to express their thoughts, desire and feeling these dispose children to non-violent actions and behaviours. With critical thinking, children will be able to look at cause and consequences of actions to determine fairness and justice, and consequently refrain from acts or behaviours that are capable.

### **Provision of environment for Peace skills to thrive**

Often times, violent encounters result from a breakdown in social relationship. It is therefore, crucial that caregivers provide enabling environment for children to demonstrate, through practice the development of peace building skills such as taking turns, being orderly, assisting peers, showing remorse, being apologetic among others. To encourage this, group plays, tasks and activities should be the hallmark of interaction activities in the classroom. By this arrangement, an environment is created for children not only to work together, but also to disagree with one another and settle themselves amicably and non-violently.

Similarly, when children are taken to the garden or nature corner/space, caregivers need to instruct them not to be destructive to plants and harmless insects found there. Children must be caused to understand that these are living things, therefore, destroying them will mean a violation of their right to live and flourish. The right thing to do is for children to tend to the plants and play with the insects.

### **Creation of space for children to express their opinion**

Children are a substantial part of the population of countries affected by conflict and fragility, and so the skills required for policy making and planning should be developed in them at this early stage of life. The development of these skills will fast track meaningful participation in peace building at adulthood as they become active leaders and partners in peace processes. In a bid to assist children overcome violence inherent in human beings and the society at large, opportunities should be created for children to express their opinions. In like manner, these opinions should be listened by the caregivers, teachers and parents.

In practice, therefore, children should be encouraged to form groups that will offer them the opportunities to have chances to formulate their opinions through expression of their views on what is happening in the classroom. Availing such opportunities to children will not only ensure that they

have a chance to formulate their opinions, but also to be heard; and to achieve this, caregivers and teachers need to encourage children to be engaged in self-expression and opinion sharing, activities such as reading and telling of stories, speech making, team playing and co-operating with others in groups or classroom. Opportunities should further be created for attentiveness in listening. Caregivers can activate this in children by asking questions relating to what children have heard and seen from others in the classroom.

### **Trust building between children and caregivers**

Peace building in ECE is more likely to succeed if children are given the capabilities and opportunities to work smoothly and effectively together with caregivers. Children see their caregivers as role models, so have faith and trust in them. As children perceive these as models, they will also want to be like them, and do what they do. Thus, in an ECE classroom, caregivers need to always create avenues and opportunities for children to always work very closely with them in the classroom. Joint classroom presentations and projects can enable children gain the trust of their caregivers, and this will in turn boost the children’s ego, courage and confidence to venture into more social actions that are capable of engendering more peace building skills.

### **Being less critical in evaluating children**

Young children are ego-laden and sensitive to their environment, hence, care must be exercised in order not to damage or bruise their ego. A child whose ego is tampered with diminishes in the classroom, and this reduction can further lead to a delay in the development of appropriate skills to boost peace building. In the classroom children approach exercises, tasks and activities through play, and this gives them some fun, excitement and enjoyment. In assessing children, therefore, caregivers need not be as critical as would be necessary for the work of an adult. This is to enable children to continue in the fun and excitement from where they derive motivation to forge ahead. Criticizing children’s work will bruise the ego and dampen their interest to learn and socialize in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Peace building has been conceived to be an entry point into peacefulness, and peace is a necessary ingredient to curb violence and insecurity. The absence of threat to lives and properties engender development at all spheres and levels of life. Due to the imperativeness of peace to be developed, it has become expedient that peace building be integrated into early childhood programmes to enable young children to develop skills for not only effective decision and policy making, but also for optimal peaceful living in the society and positive functionality in society. An integration of this nature will enhance social interaction opportunities for children, create opportunities for reflection, perspective taking and critical thinking by young children, provide environment for peace skills to thrive and a space of children to express their feelings and be heard. Lastly, trust building between children and their caregivers will be strengthened as they embark on joint class activities.

It is worthwhile, therefore, to arrest all the elements of violence and insecurity by instituting peace building in early childhood education and care centres so that children will imbibe the skills and grow up with such into adulthood.

### Way Forward

As a way of neutralizing violence and insecurity through the integration of peace building into the early childhood curriculum, the following recommendations are made:

The early childhood education curriculum in Nigeria should be reviewed to incorporate themes and topics bothering on peace building and avenue to curbing violence and insecurity. The idea is to develop the skills needed to build peace and dealing with violence and insecurity from the cradle.

In order to handle the above mentioned, the capacity of caregivers need to be built through relevant training programmes to enable them implement the envisaged reviewed curriculum of early childhood education.

A variety of play materials should be provided in adequate quantities for the use of the preschoolers. Play reduces tension and aggression in children, and also engenders an atmosphere for development of social capital among children as they interact with both peers and caregivers. Thus, effort should be made to realize the objective of play.

Nature space or corners should be provided, and if already existing, should be improved. This is to enable children to care, love and be kind beyond human beings and take these to the level of nurturing plants in the garden or vases. This action is capable of improving children's relationship with the environment.

In assessing children, caregivers should not be as critical as they would do for an adult learner. This is an attempt to enable children sustain the fun and excitement in the them as they learn.

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