

Early Intervention for Children with Intellectual Disabilities: Nigeria Perspective

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Abstract: *Early intervention is very important for all children and especially those with special needs. This study investigated the needs for early intervention for children with intellectual disabilities in Oyo State Nigeria. The study adopted a survey research design and 122 special educators that were purposively selected from the Federal College of Education Oyo and other five selected special schools in Ibadan participated in the study. Questionnaire was the instrument used in collecting the data and data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation. Results showed that the participants agreed that early intervention will help in identifying children with ID early (mean=3.72) early intervention will improve areas of challenges in the children (mean 3.76) also that the Nigeria government has a policy for early intervention (mean=3.11). Result also showed that the participants are of the opinion that poor attention to early intervention programme by the government (mean=3.46), poor funding (mean=3.29), poor remuneration of teachers (mean=3.11) among others are factors militating against the practice of early intervention in Oyo State. Government should consider early intervention as an important factor to be implemented. Education budget should include children with special needs by giving them the opportunity to live a fulfilled life.*

Key words: *Early intervention, children, intellectual, disabilities, Nigeria*

I. Background

Early intervention is a system of coordinated services that promotes the child's age-appropriate growth and development and supports the families during the critical early years. In the United States for example, some early intervention services to eligible children and families are federally mandated through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Centre for Excellence for Children Outcome (2001) defined early intervention as, intervening early, and as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and their families, or with population most at risk of developing intellectual disabilities. The first five years of a child is so critical with or without disabilities, because this is when development takes place very rapidly hence, every effort must be put in place to identify and intervene early especially for children with disabilities.

Early intervention is very important for children especially those with special needs. Adebisi et al, (2004) and Kazaure (2014) affirm that early intervention has great impact on the overall well-being of the child and his family because early assessment enables the professionals to plan a programme early which would be of great benefit for the future development of the child.

Early intervention is very useful at every stage especially at the early stage of a child's life, this is because adequate programmes/management can be instituted on time. Early intervention services are designed to meet the needs of infants and toddlers who have a developmental delay or disability. Sometimes, the need for early intervention services will be essential in helping the child grow and develop, and at times, it might be necessary to make a referral of a child as soon as he/she is born to the local early intervention office (NDCCD, 2010)

Marilyn (2002) reporting the benefits of early identification and early intervention said that people are astonished at the positive changes observed in the children. In support of this, Olness (2003) remarked that early intervention is playing an increasing prominent role in the field of intellectual disabilities. He said worldwide for example, the issue of developmental disabilities has become a matter of concern. Realistic estimates as at 2003 was that approximately, 780 million children may be affected between birth and 5 years of age. This figure, according to Olness (2003) represents the increasing number of identifiable biological and environmental factors associated with intellectual disability, as well as those conditions that place children at risk.

Expectations are very high that much can be accomplished during the first 5 years of life through the thoughtful implementation of systematically, comprehensive, experientially based early intervention programmes (Guralnick, 1997, 1998)

Behavioural problems which are one of the major concerns of parents of children with intellectual disabilities are found to be three times more in 3 years old with developmental delays than those without delays

and parents go through a lot of stress in attending to these behavioural problems (Baker 2003). Parents often time play down on the cognitive delay when they are overwhelmed by the behavioural problems. Early intervention has been found to be very useful in reducing the stress of parents. Feldman and Werner (2002) found collateral effects of behavioural parents training as measured by decreased family stress, increased parental self efficacy and improved child and family quality of life.

As crucial and important early intervention programme is to children with intellectual disabilities, Nigeria is still far from operating early intervention programmes. The National Policy on Education Document (2004), defined early intervention/early childhood education, as the education provided in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. This includes the Crèche, Nursery and the Kindergarten.

Onu et al (2010) opined that the earliest years of a child's life are very crucial, because this has influence on how the rest of childhood and adolescence unfolds. Unfortunately in most developing countries including Nigeria, the policies, programmes and budget of the Nations have not reflected the seriousness with which the matter ought to be addressed. By implication, children with intellectual disabilities are also left out in issues that relate to early intervention, especially at Federal and State levels. Most of the nursery schools in Nigeria are owned by private individuals despite the government promises (Onu et al 2010). Onu et al went further to state that most of the available nursery schools currently operate on university campuses, church premises, industrial and business organizations premises, and more often than none there is no assurance of the quality of the curricula, and the aesthetics are poor, and yet in most cases only wealthy ones can afford to send their young ones to the institutions.

In a study conducted in Oyo State by Alade and Eni-Olorunda (2005), persons with special needs were estimated to be 3.84 million of the entire population of people with disabilities. If early intervention programme is instituted, a lot of children would be identified much earlier, and the family will experience meaningful results from intervention. This study therefore sought to investigate the need for early intervention for children with intellectual disabilities in Oyo state Nigeria. The following research questions were therefore formulated:

1. Is early intervention programme for children with intellectual disabilities in place in Oyo State, Nigeria?
2. Do special educators in Oyo State have the knowledge of the need for early intervention for children with ID?
3. What is the position of Nigerian government on early intervention programme for children with ID?
4. What are the factors militating against early intervention programme for children with ID in Oyo State?

II. Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design. One hundred and twenty two (122) special educators, (50) from Oyo (Special) Federal College of Education and (72) from other 5 selected special schools in Ibadan that were purposively selected participated in the study. Questionnaire tagged Need for Early Intervention Programme (NEIP) was the instrument used in collecting data. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.68. Four (4) postgraduate students from the University of Ibadan were employed as research assistants in administering the questionnaire which was carried out within five days. The data obtained was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages.

III. Results

Research Question 1: Is early intervention programme for children with ID in place in Oyo State, Nigeria?

To answer this question, the respondents were made to respond to a poser that 'my state has started practicing early intervention programme for children with ID'. Figure 1 presents their responses.

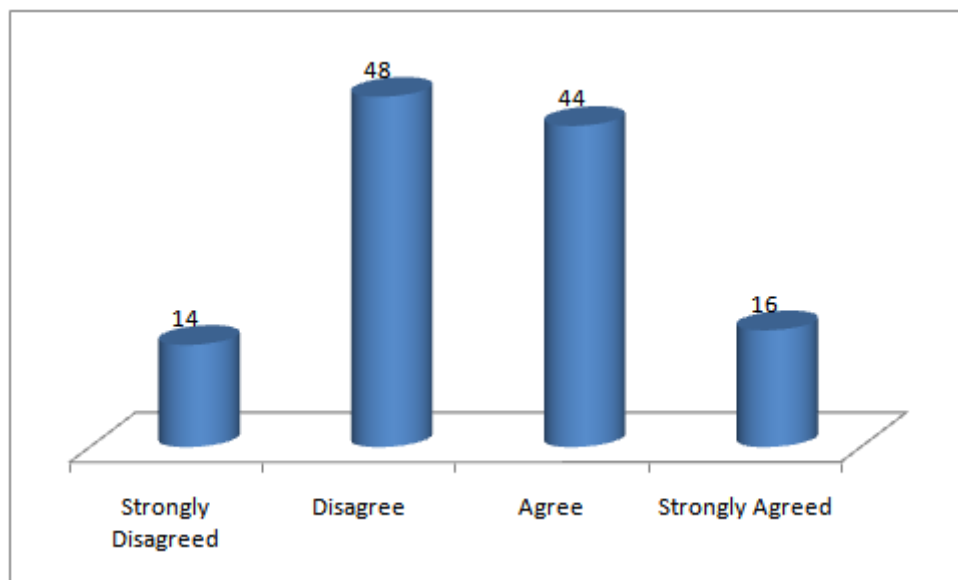


Figure 1: Special Educators' Responses to Existence of Early Intervention in Oyo State

Figure 1 reveals that 62 (51%) indicated that early intervention for children with ID has not started in Oyo State while 60 (49%) indicated that it has started. This indicates that the special educators in Oyo State are not sure of the existence of early intervention in the state.

Research Question 2: Do special educators in Oyo State have knowledge of the need for early intervention for children with ID?

To answer this question, a 4-point Likert scale with 8 items was used to obtain the information from Special Educators. Table 1 presents the summary of their responses using mean and standard deviation.

Table 1: Knowledge of Special Educators in Oyo State about the need for Early Intervention for Children with ID

S/N	ITEMS	N	MEAN	STD.D	REMARK
1	If early intervention programme is in place, it will help in identifying children with disabilities early and appropriate steps would be taken to effectively manage their disabilities	122	3.72	.45	Strongly agree
2	If early intervention is instituted for a child with ID, it will help to improve areas that pose challenges such as delayed speech.	121	3.76	.55	Strongly agree
3	A child with ID can be helped to develop self help skills e.g (eating, dressing) independently if early intervention is instituted.	121	3.57	.51	Strongly agree
4	If early intervention is in place, it can help the special educator to place a child with ID in the appropriate school programme.	122	3.69	.53	Strongly agree
5	A child with ID will improve remarkably in school work (e.g. reading, writing) if early intervention is embraced.	122	3.47	.55	Strongly agree
6	Inappropriate behavior in a child with ID can be changed positively if early intervention is instituted.	121	3.38	.70	Agree
7	For a successful early intervention programme to be recorded, collaboration with parents is required.	122	3.70	.51	Strongly agree
8	Individualized programme which addresses the specific needs of children with ID is better handled if early intervention is instituted.	122	3.62	.57	Strongly agree
Weighted Average			3.61 (90.3%)		

Table 1 shows that the special educators strongly agreed with the following items: that early intervention will help in identifying children with ID early so as to take appropriate steps for effective management (mean = 3.72); that early intervention will improve areas that pose challenges such as delayed speech (mean = 3.76); it will enable the child to develop self help skills (mean = 3.57); it will help special educators to place the child in an appropriate school programme (mean = 3.69); it will enable the child with ID to improve remarkably in school work (mean = 3.47); successful early intervention requires collaboration with parents (mean = 3.7) and that it will enhance individualized programme that addresses the specific needs of the child with ID (mean = 3.62). They also agreed that early intervention will help to change inappropriate behavior in a child with ID (mean = 3.38).

The weighted average is 3.61 which can be rated to 90.3%. This shows that special educators have adequate knowledge of the need for early intervention for children with ID.

Research Question 3: What is the position of Nigerian Government on Early Intervention Programme for Children with ID?

To answer this question, a 4-point Likert scale with 5 items was used to obtain the information from special educators. Table 2 presents the summary of their responses using mean and standard deviation.

Table 2: Nigerian Government’s Position on Early Intervention for Children with ID

S/N	ITEMS	N	MEAN	STD.D	REMARK
1	Early Intervention programme in form of Pre-School/ Nursery for children with intellectual disabilities is part of the National policy.	120	3.11	1.05	Agree
2	My state has started practicing early intervention programme for children with intellectual disabilities	122	2.51	.86	Agree
3	The government has placed equal importance on early intervention programme on all children (with or without) intellectual disabilities.	122	2.46	.86	Agree
4	The government’s budget allocation for early intervention programme for children with ID in my state is very encouraging	121	2.11	.77	Disagree
5	The government’s interest in early intervention programme for children with ID has made it compulsory for the training of more teachers	122	2.29	.84	Disagree

Table 2 shows that special educators agreed with the following: that early intervention for children with ID is part of the National Policy (mean = 3.11) and that government placed equal importance on early intervention programme for all children with or without ID (mean = 2.46). But special educators disagreed that government’s budget allocation for early intervention programme for children with ID in the state is very encouraging (mean = 2.11) and that the government’s interest in early intervention programme for children with ID has made it compulsory for the training of more teachers (mean = 2.29).

Based on this, it can be inferred that Nigerian government has a policy for early intervention which covers all children with special needs but the budget allocation for the intervention is not encouraging and that government’s interest in it has not translated to training of more special education teachers.

Research Question 4: What are the factors militating against early intervention programme for children with ID in Oyo State?

To answer this question, a 4-point Likert scale with 7 items was used to obtain the information from the special educators. Table 3 presents the summary of their responses using mean and standard deviation.

Table 3: Factors militating against early intervention programme in Oyo State.

S/N	ITEMS	N	MEAN	STD.D	REMARK
1	Early intervention programme for children with intellectual disabilities (ID) is experiencing difficulties because the government is not paying required attention to it.	122	3.46	.76	Agree
2	The programme is experiencing difficulty due to the fact that stakeholders regard caring for children with ID as a waste of resources.	122	3.22	.73	Agree
3	The problem with early intervention has to do with the fact that government alone cannot adequately fund it.	122	3.29	.72	Agree
4	Individuals who consider intellectual disabilities as a permanent condition hardly see any worthwhile result from providing early intervention programme for them.	121	3.30	.62	Agree
5	Shortage of special education teachers in schools would not encourage early intervention programmes to be instituted for children with special needs/intellectual disabilities.	121	3.06	.91	Agree
6	Teaching children with ID is very cumbersome, and remuneration of teachers (special educators inclusive) is rather poor in Nigeria. This could discourage any teacher from wanting to participate in early intervention programme.	122	3.11	.82	Agree
7	Children with ID are kept away from school because of parents ignorance about the potentials of the children, this could stand as a barrier in the implementation of early intervention programme.	122	3.44	.58	Agree

Table 3 shows that the special educators agreed that the following are the factors militating against early intervention for children with ID in Oyo State: government is not paying required attention to it (mean = 3.46); stakeholders regard caring for children with ID as a waste of time (mean = 3.22); the intervention cannot be funded by government alone (mean = 3.29); those providing early intervention in the past hardly see any worthwhile result (mean = 3.30); shortage of special education teachers (mean = 3.06); teaching children with

ID is cumbersome and the remuneration of teachers is poor (mean = 3.11) and the children with ID are kept away from school because of parents ignorance (mean = 3.44).

IV. Discussion

Responses from participants indicated that they were not sure of the existence of early intervention in the state, although they have adequate knowledge of the need for early intervention for children with ID. As revealed in the study, majority of the respondents believed that if early intervention programme is instituted, it will help in identifying children with disabilities early and appropriate steps would be taken to effectively manage their disabilities. It will also help to improve areas that pose challenges such as delayed speech, and improve self help skills in the areas of eating and dressing. On the other hand, it helps the special educators to place a child with ID in the appropriate school programmes. As a matter of fact, for a successful early intervention programme to be recorded, majority of the respondents agreed that collaboration with parents is required. Also from this study, it was observed that only a few of the respondents agreed that early intervention programme was in place for children with intellectual disabilities in Oyo State, the same hold for early intervention programme in form of Pre-school/Nursery for children with intellectual disabilities which is part of the National policy. The truth is that the government has a policy for early intervention, but the implementation is the problem and this agrees with the findings of Onu et al (2010) that in most developing countries including Nigeria, the policies, programmes and budget of the Nations have not reflected the seriousness with which the matter ought to be addressed. Factors such as non commitment of the government to the programme, stakeholders considering the care of children with ID as a waste of time, shortage of special educators, poor remuneration of teachers and ignorance on the part of parents were identified as problems that could militate against the practice of early intervention in Nigeria.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

As indicated in this study, special educators agreed that early intervention programme for children with intellectual disabilities are essential. Recommendations were therefore made that government should consider early intervention very important and ensure that it is fully implemented. Also, education budget allocation should include children with special needs so that they can be well catered for thereby giving them the opportunity to live a fulfilled life. Special educators should also be well remunerated so that they can be encouraged to get committed to their duties, and awareness programme such as seminars and workshops should be mounted for parents from time to time to educate them on the importance of early intervention programmes for children with intellectual disabilities.

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