

GIVE ME MY CHILDHOOD: THE LAMENTATION OF ZERO TO EIGHT YEARS

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By

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Ode to Childhood

Childhood, childhood, childhood
An enthralling period of life too
When the world unfolds before our very eyes
Like a vast playground of endless possibilities, we sight.

Fill with dreams that reach for the stars
Hopes that soar; high as the imagination authorises with no scars
A time when the humdrum transforms into the extraordinary
The simplest pleasures hold the power sundry
Weaving lasting memories that endure.

Childhood, a period of boisterous energy
Misinterpreted as too playful; occasionally spanked at whims
Me! Many words at heart to utter but None
No one there to listen
Hands ready to explore but restricted.

Oh! That I be understood as ME
I am in my own world; unique and distinct Me
Allow me to be ME and see me bud, boom and blossom!
Let Me be Me.

Salutation

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, Principal Officers of the University, the Deans of all Faculties, the Provosts of all Colleges, Directors of all Units, all Heads of Department, Distinguished Members of the Senate, Royal Fathers, the Spiritual Fathers present, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Students of this Great Institution,

The Nigerian Children, All Associations working for the Nigerian Child (ECAN, OMEP, FPCD, Good Deeds etc), Gentlemen of the Press.

I am here today to deliver my inaugural lecture, which is the 404th edition in the University, the 21st in Faculty of Education, the 6th in the Institute of Education and the 1st in the Early Childhood Education Unit of this great citadel of learning. To God alone be the glory for granting me His favour and mercy that surround me like a shield to be among the scholars to do this. It is not by power, nor by might but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts. 'It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy (Romans: 9:16).

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir. I studied early childhood education with a bias in Language Arts, a field of study that prepares professionals for effective and developmentally appropriate interaction with children in their early stage, from the University of Ibadan. My research areas focus on child development, language and literacy development, play, playground and playthings, assessment and cultural promotion in the early years.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir. the title, 'Give Me My Childhood: The Lamentation of the Zero to Eight Years' is borne out of my experience with children over the years on plethora issues that concern their holistic development from conception, which is the Zero age because the child is not seen physically, to the age of eight. The experience of the child during this early period influences everything about the child into adulthood. That is why it is pertinent to really

understand childhood and give appropriate attention to this stage of development before it is too late.



Fig. 1: GRADUATED STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT TO 8 YEARS (NeoLacta Lifeciencies)

<https://www.bing.com>.

Understanding Childhood

The way childhood is viewed historically influenced the treatment of the concept. First and foremost, it has to be established that childhood is a shared humanity; while not every human may reach adulthood, everyone experiences childhood.

This notion was aptly captured by Professor Ajike Osanyin, founder of the Early Childhood Association of Nigeria, in her 2012 inaugural lecture titled "Once Upon a Child."

Biologically, childhood starts from conception to the onset of adolescent, basically age of 12. Childhood can be classified into three stages, namely; early childhood, middle childhood and late childhood. While every stage of childhood is important, the early childhood stage is more critical as it sets the platform for subsequent stages of development.

Early Childhood Stage

This is the foundation of human life and the formative stage. It is a ‘sensitive period of development’ because it shapes the trajectory of holistic development of the child. It is a period of rapid brain and body development with more than one million new neural connections formed every second. That is, the brain develops faster at this stage than any other period of development. Research has established that 90 percent of the brain develops in the first five years with the remaining 10% developing in the later years of life (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority, 2024; First Thing First, 2018).

Indeed, the early years are the most active period for establishing neural connections. Although, new connections can form throughout life, the connections in the early years will provide either a strong or weak foundation for the connections that are formed later in life and the foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health (Ajayi 2025; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2025; Center for the Developing Child, 2025).

Hence, the period is therefore referred to as ‘windows of opportunity’, however it can become windows of ‘vulnerability’ if the appropriate environments are not provided at the right time.

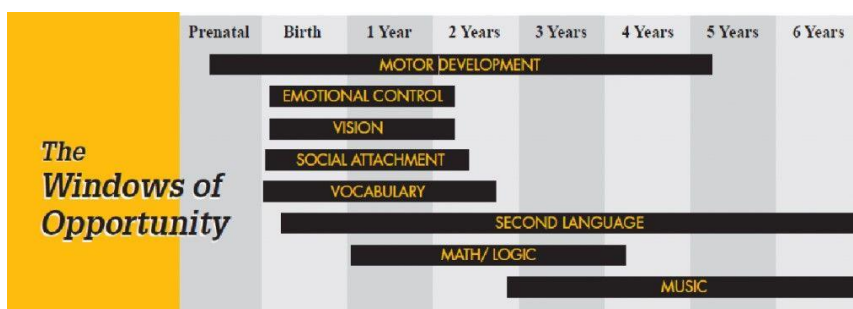


Fig.2: SafeGard Classes

(nd.). <https://sgclassesonline.com/>

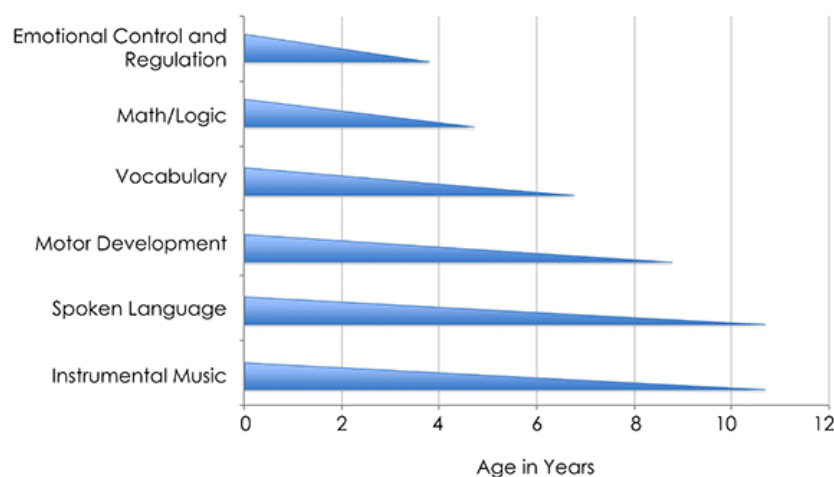


FIG.3: Stephen R. (2025).

5 Windows of Opportunity: Make Childhood Extraordinary

From Figs 2 and 3, the windows for various development are shown, that is, when the development of certain skill begins and when it closes. For instance, the windows for motor development open before birth while the child is still in the womb and close between ages five and seven. The motor development in terms of fine and gross motor skills are best acquired and learned at this period of development. The fine motor refers to the use and coordination of small muscles in movement with eyes, hand, fingers and wrists. There are six main fine motor skills that children must be able to exhibit before the close of this window; these are pincer grasp, hand – eye coordination, finger dexterity, scissors skills, writing readiness and drawing abilities. The activities such as grasping, holding, buttoning, lacing, zipping, cutting, colouring with precision, manipulating small objects and writing are the functions of fine motor.

If children miss or have insufficient exposure to fine motor activities during these critical periods, they may experience difficulties in acquiring these specific abilities. (Ajayi & Oriowo, 2020; Psychology Town., 2024).

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, are there surgeons, dentists, pathologists, graphic artists, music professional, architects, designers, teachers, and others in this auditorium today, whose careers depend largely on fine motor skills? They will all agree with me that any fixation of fine motor

muscles at this early year is detrimental to the realisation of educational objectives of careers along this spectrum. Tasks that require delicate manipulation of fine motor muscles would be difficult and any mistakes may result into serious consequences. For instance, in the process of surgery or suturing by surgeons, any error may have life threatening consequences, if not the death of patients. Likewise, any careless strokes on the part of graphic artist may ruin the artwork. More importantly, teachers' handwriting can make or mar children' cognitive process of decoding written information, the working memory and cognitive load of children in the early years.

Chen, et. al. (2018) indicated that poor quality input from teachers in form of poor handwriting can increase cognitive load, reduce memory and learning efficiency.

Some causes of fine motor muscles' fixation that are often underplayed are environmental and psychological factors, such as poor stimulation either at home or in school, improper instructional methods and parents' outrageous expectation of the child, leading to stress and anxiety in the child. Some expressions such as, 'I want my child to write 1 to 1000 at age two like my neighbour's child', is an outrageous expectation that puts pressure on both the child and the teacher. In an attempt to meet such expectations, the teacher may resort to unorthodox methods, such as forcing the readiness of fine motor muscles by holding the child's hand to write.

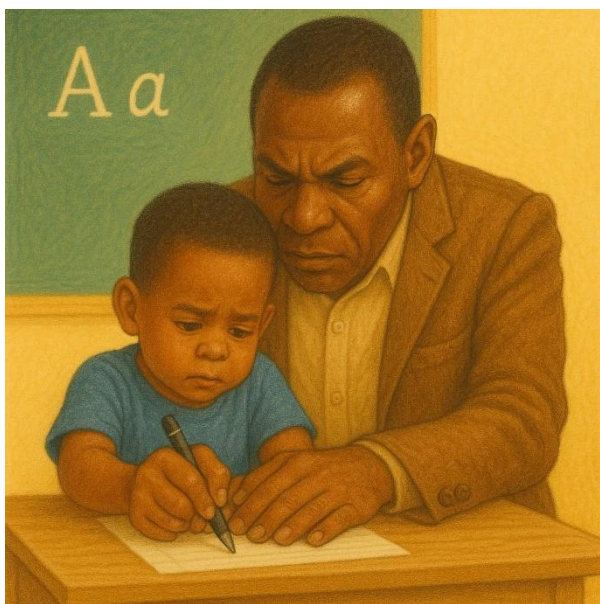


Fig. 4: A Teacher holding a child's hand to write (AI-Generated)

When teachers do this, it is an aberration to proper development of the fine motor muscles. The skills are to follow the natural trajectory of maturation through engagement in fine motor activities with toys, and other building, drawing and manipulative materials, without any pressure. Supporting this view, Ajayi and Oriowo (2020) established a strong relationship between visual perceptual and motor integration skills in the development and exhibition of handwriting among pupils in Osun State. Many learners have also suffered humiliation or setbacks due to their poor handwriting resulting from inappropriate development of fine motor muscles.

Historical Context Versus Childhood as a Social Construct

The period of childhood from time immemorial was taken for granted by the adult world. Human race has been reproducing, bringing forth and showing affection to children but 'childhood' was not recognised or understood. Philippe Aries (1986) and Neil Postman (1994) stated that the phenomenon called, 'childhood' was not understood in history; the idea of human giving birth to children is not tantamount to 'childhood'.

At a particular time in history, children were seen as miniature adult and were not treated differently nor recognised as a being that is in need of particular concerns. They were given same treatment that adults experienced. So, it is a stage of life that was either despised or venerated by adults. Hence, in ages before the contemporary time, children engaged in practically what adults did, even in sexuality games, they were not exempted. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, children were taken as property or economic assets. So, they were made to work in factories and exposed to hardship to the extent that they experienced factory hazards (Norman, 2017; Mazinjanin, 2024; History Skills, 2025; King, 2025).

At another period, childhood was seen as a stage of innocence with the notion that ‘the child does not know anything, immature, irrational, and incompetent’ and has to depend totally on adults for attention, care and protection (James and Sprout, 1997; James et.al, 1998; Smart et.al, 2001 cited in Norman, 2017). Everything about the child is controlled by the adult world with little or no opportunity given to children to be who they are. Their thought is controlled, play is controlled, dress and anything and everything about them is controlled. Children have been turned to ‘zombie’ that must obey the last order, whether they like it or not; whether it is convenient for them or not. All these under the guise that, ‘they do not know their left from right.’

Though, in traditional African society, children were not subjected to such hardship. Children were loved and cherished and they were seen as gift from God until civilisation was embraced, they therefore became object of possession (Ajayi and Iroegbu, 2023). However, despite the love for children in the African setting, the ideology of, ‘children are to be seen and not heard’ was held on to, which was not helpful to childhood development. If all of us sitting here today could cast our minds back to our childhood period, I know many may have inner pains remembering their childhood while a few might feel satisfied with their childhood experience.

It has been stated that very often memories of this period in our lives become imbued with nostalgia, or, where too painful to recall (Norman, 2017).

Childhood goes beyond biological or embryonic model, it is an active social agent with emotions, with their own perspectives and who can construct their own meaning to life and contribute to the society as well. This implies that children are not passive recipients of socialisation, rather, they inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through interaction with adults (James, et. al. 1998). Hence, there is the need for the reconstruction of childhood for clearer understanding, treatments and values accorded to children in the contemporary time.

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, who says, children do not have opinion of their own? Who says they cannot make decisions? My personal experience while growing up attest to this that children can make personal decision as early as possible.



Fig. 5: Hannah at babyhood

At age two, I was taken to my home town on a visit to my paternal grandmother from Ibadan. When my parents were ready to go back to their base, it was said that I bid them goodbye and decided to stay with my granny. My parents thought I was joking, they made the move of

leaving, thinking I would cry and follow them. To their amasement, I did not consider them for a second and that was how I stayed with granny from the age of two till she passed on when I was six years old. She did her best to give me an endearing childhood which I could not forget. Like an adult, children also face situations that require them to make some decisions, though, their capabilities for decision making are not fully developed because it is a complex process. It behooves on adults to guide children and not to force their own opinions on children. They should be allowed to exercise the cognitive processes of decision-making in a socially responsive environment (Betsch, & Lang., 2013; Betsch, Lang, Lehmann, & Axmann, 2014; Betsch, Lehmann, Lindow, Lang, & Schoemann, 2016; Lindow, Lang, & Betsch, 2017; Lang, & Betsch, 2018).

When children are allowed to engage in decision- making, it enhances their cognitive, emotional and moral development. This is not indulgence but helping a child to have a balance development by being flexible, responsive, consistent and using discipline as supportive measures than punitive for children.

Helping a child develop holistically involves interconnection of both biological and social construct of childhood (that is, nature – nurture concept) and it is what should start from zero age.

Holistic development refers to a child's growth and development in all areas: physical, social, emotional, intellectual/cognitive, language and moral/spiritual (McIlroy, 2024). All these areas are interconnected, and any deficiencies in any aspect will directly or indirectly influence the other.

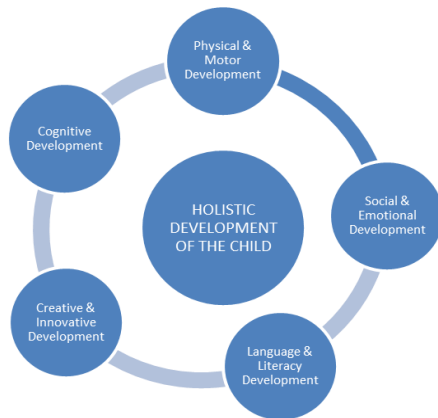


Fig. 6: Interconnectivity of Developmental Domains

It is to be pointed out here that dereliction of the duty to children is what is responsible for the decadence or catastrophe in the world. In spite of the societal development, civilisation, and advancement, it is expected that there would be sanity in every facet but reverse is the case because the foundation of life, development or advancement, which is childhood, has not been properly built; hence, the house is shaken, and the Bible says, ‘if the foundation be destroyed, what can the righteous do?’

Convention on the Rights of the Child and Childhood

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) is a document that spelt out the rights that must be accorded children anywhere in the world for establishing proper development. Some of the rights are: i. Rights to Life and Development, ii. Right to Identity, iii. Right to play, iv. Right to their own Language and Culture, v. Right to Quality Education, among many others.

Norman (2017) therefore stated that the rights can be classified into three Ps namely:

- ✓ Protection – children are to be protected from neglect, abuse, exploitation and discrimination;
- ✓ Provision – children should have rights to necessary goods, services and resources; and

- ✓ Participation – children should be respected as active members of their family, community and society, contributing from their earliest years.

Unfortunately, almost all these rights are trampled upon at different sectors – home, school, community, and nations at large, hence, the basis for childhood lamentation which is the focus of this lecture.

The Childhood Lamentation

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir. Childhood lamentation as far as this lecture is concerned is the silent cry, the longing, unmet desires in the heart of children on issues that have to do with their growth, development, care and learning which are taken for granted, trampled upon, neglected and denied. This implies, what makes childhood, a childhood indeed, are not there. Such issues are: play, playgrounds and playthings, care, education, safety, protection, identity, language, culture, among others. So long these issues are kept at bay, the children's holistic development will keep hanging in the balance and there will be no childhood. Hence, the lamentation will not only keep increasing but also negatively affecting holistic development of children, their later life and even the society at large. Many a time they resort to being recalcitrant or throw tantrum when they do not know how to express their minds for adults to understand, instead, they get spanked and traumatised.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, here are the trends of children's moaning, all culminated as one 'Childhood Lamentation':

- Do I Matter at all?
- Am I Really an Empty Slate?
- Why are my Rights Trampled upon?
- Why am I Debarred from play?

- Where are my playgrounds/ open spaces?
- Where are playthings/toys for me to play with?
- Where is my language?
- What is my identity?
- Why is my environment hostile to me?
- I am ME and not another person. Let me BE!!!



Fig. 7: Issues for Childhood Lamentation (AI -Generated Image, (2025)

Let us consider them one after the other.

a) Do I Matter at All?

Many children around the world are silently asking existential questions such as: "Do I matter at all?" because of what they experience. This question goes beyond mere rhetoric; it echoes the persistent neglect, abandonment, invisibility, and marginalization that children face across various sectors. The lamentation shows children's desire for recognition, respect, love, and inclusion in the spaces they inhabit, the home, school, community, and society at large. In many instances, children are ignored, misrepresented, or dismissed as not too matter. When nursery education is regarded as, 'Je 'le o simi', what does that connote? It means the children are troubling you at home and you need somewhere to send them to for you to have rest, instead of seeing nursery education as a foundational stage to be given critical attention in the best

interests of the child. Can there be a house without a foundation? If a mansion or a castle is built on a wobbly foundation, will the house stand? This is a food for thought.

The children cry, ‘Do I Matter at All’? is for affirmation and justice against:

Emotional neglect, social marginalization and policy insincerity

For instance, there is emotional unavailability or inconsistency on the part of parents, caregivers and other stakeholders in child development. More importantly in this age of technology where technological devices get more attention from every adult around them than the child. Children feel lonely, despite the fact that they are with their parents or other adults around them. Parent – child bonding or adult – child interaction specified by attachment and socio-cultural theories for healthy development of children has been transferred to technological devices in homes.



Fig. 8: A father fully engrossed with his technological device with the children feeling neglected



Fig. 9: A son seeking the attention of his father



Fig. 10: A daughter begging for mother's attention

Fathers, mothers, teachers, here today, are you not guilty?

Ajayi, Gbenga- Akanmu and Popoola, (2023) assessed the experience of children with the use of technologies by Nigerian parents. The findings showed that families in Nigeria are becoming technologically sophisticated, parents' use of technologies is on the high rate and children – parent relationship is negatively influenced by the various technological gadgets. Hence, children in Nigeria and elsewhere are experiencing social distancing from parents.

Ajayi and Aregbesola (2011), Ajayi (2015) and Ajayi (2019) established social marginalization of girl-child in education and poor policy implementation on ECE provision at the expiration of Millennium Development Goals year.

So, the yearnings in the mind of children are begging for positive action from all adults to give an unequivocal answer, 'Yes, you matter. You are seen, heard, valued, and loved' to childhood through the provision of all that can make them develop and thrive adequately.

b) Am I Really an Empty Slate?

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, the ideology of John Locke about children has done more harm to childhood than good as it has affected the way children are perceived and treated in the education sector. John Locke viewed children as an empty slate, '*tabula rasa*' that the environment needs to write on. The implication is that nurture is the only driving force for children's intellectual development. The theory seems to turn the child to automation that is to be programmed to do the bid of the environment but the questions to be considered are: Where then is the place of nature in a child? What does 'being pre-wired' stands for? What is the child pre-wired for? Is the child not also hard-wired for certain attributes?

Studies have established that children are pre-wired for language readiness, emotional attachment, curiosity and intrinsic values to explore, pre-wired for number sense, pre-wired for social engagement and many more. The environment is just to activate the pre-wired potentials. By being hard-wired implies that there are permanent and fixed neural mechanisms in the child's brain and body for certain traits and behaviour that children do not need to learn but rather to be stimulated. They are innate, only need to be activated by the environment (nurture) (Hero, 2024; Werker, & Hensch, 2015; Skeide, & Friederici, 2016; Tomasello, 2019; Giedd, & Rapoport, 2020; Kuhl, 2021; Kolb & Gibb, 2021).

Many children are tongue – lashed and are called ‘dullards., ‘Olodo.’ It is to be placed on record that, ‘NO CHILD IS A DULLARD’. If any child is not doing well academically, many factors that can be categorised into intrinsic (maturation, learning styles) and extrinsic (home factors, curriculum, pedagogy, instructional materials, teacher ‘s personality) must be carefully considered (Kolawole & Ajayi,2003; Ajayi & Adediran, 2013); Ajayi, 2015; Popoola & Ajayi, 2017; Ajayi, 2019).

c) Why Are My Rights Trampled upon?

Children in different nations have been experiencing the violation of their rights. They are exposed to all forms of abuse, violence, child labour, child marriage, trafficking, neglect or abandonment, displacement and many others until there were documents to protect them. The first international document known as, ‘Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child’ to protect children came out in 1924. It was initiated by Eglantyne Jebb, who was the founder of Save the Children. She advocated the rights of children all over the world. By this, she changed the narratives of how the world regarded and treated children.

In 1959, the Declaration was expanded to accommodate more principles. In 1989, United Nations further expanded the declaration and named it Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The rights are then classified under four core principles namely:

- ✓ Non-discrimination
- ✓ Best interests of the child
- ✓ Right to life, survival and development
- ✓ Respect for the views of the child (UN, 1989), domesticated in Nigeria in 2003.

In spite of this legal international document, UNICEF and International Labour Organisation reported that globally, 138 million children within the age of 5 – 17 years are in child labour as at 2024, and involved in hazardous work that can jeopardise their health. Sub-Saharan

Africa was said to be the hardest hit with 87 million trafficked children serving as labourers within the age range of 5 and 11.



Fig. 11: Trafficked Children Rescued by Intepol



Fig. 12: Rescued Trafficked Children Returning Home – Channel Television

The situation is worrisome to the extent that there is the fear of whether the continent Africa is safe for children any more (Nkomo, 2025).

At home front, Idowu and Ajayi (2021), studied cases of child abuse in homes in Osun State. The results showed that different forms of child abuse occur in various homes; which were considered as either abuse or discipline/training measure. The study concluded that child abuse is still a menace that must be attended to through massive awareness programme to parents and other stakeholders.

In a bid to address child abuse occurrence from the school setting's angle, Idowu and Ajayi (2022) developed a Child Protection and Safety Learning Package for Primary School Teachers, examined the effect on teachers' knowledge and attitude towards child protection and safety in primary schools in Osun State. Findings showed that the package helped reorientate teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards child protection and safety and there was improvement in their knowledge and attitude to child abuse issues after the treatment.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, children's right to quality education is being denied as well. With 2025 statistics, 272 million children are out of school globally while Nigeria has 18.3 million (Agwam, 2024; Ajayi, 2024; UNICEF, 2025), which means childhood rights to education, (SDG 4) is trampled upon in Nigeria. Even, those who are in school could hardly read nor write their names at the completion of primary education due to poor educational quality. Hence, Nigeria is said to be facing learning crisis because 73% of pupils have difficulty with basic reading and comprehension skills (Ajayi, 2006; Okafor, 2023).

d) Why Am I Debarred from Play?

Play is a concept that adults always frown at with children. Most of the time one hears statements such as, 'You play too much', 'You are too playful' and others like that from parents and teachers. This is because adults have erroneous beliefs or misconceptions about play. Even the teachers who are supposed to know better are not helpful. These misconceptions affect the extent to which children are allowed to play either at home or in school.

To the adult world, the following are the views about play:

- ✚ Play is a waste of time and frivolous.
- ✚ Children do not learn anything when they are playing,

- ✚ Play has no purpose.
- ✚ Play will not help children achieve the learning standards (Ajayi, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2008; Whitebread, *et. al.*, 2012; World Forum, 2022).
- ✚ Play makes a child to be a dullard.

With these views, play is always kicked against and no time is schedule for play either at home or in school, rather children are bombarded with academic activities all day. As they return from school, lesson teachers are either waiting for them or there are loads of homework to be attended to, even on weekends. In school, the duration of recess and long break has been reduced to accommodate more subjects.

In Bamiwuye, Ajayi, and Gbenga – Akanmu (2025) study, curriculum overload was established in majority of private schools explored in Osun State where it can be stated that 26 subjects were taught as what used to be a single subject before were split and made to assume the status of a whole subject on the time-table. The time-table was choked and play time reduced. The workload was found to significantly affect the emotional well-being of pupils.

Facts about Children's Play

It must be stated here that play is children's work and central to their learning and development.

Play is the way children wrestle with life to make it meaningful.

In fact, when children are not allowed to play, it does more harm to their total being.

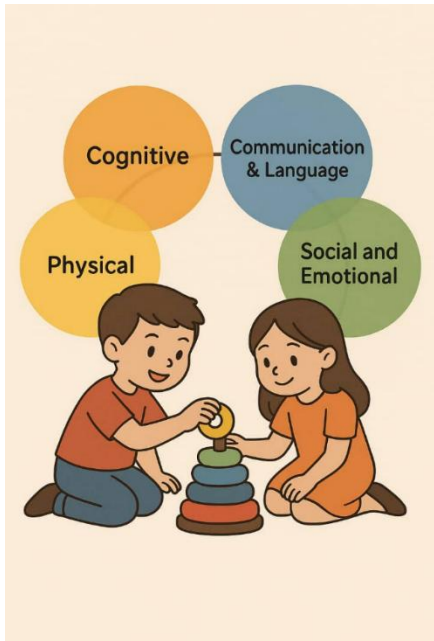


Fig 13: Play as a ring connecting all domains of development in children

Play is the ring that joins all the domains together. To this end scholars in the field of early childhood development advocate that children should be given varied opportunities to engage in all manners of play (Ekine,2012; Ajayi,2008).

Research has established that six feel – good hormones are stimulated when children play; these are endorphins, oxytocin, dopamine, norepinephrine, Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid (GABA) and serotonin. The hormones are referred to as the key to mental health, such as, improved mood, stress reduction, greater happiness and a strong feeling of being alive. It is further stated that the effect of the hormones spans beyond childhood level to adulthood. For instance, oxytocin is a powerful relational hormone that helps in building positive relationship with others (Edwards, 2016; Gidado, 2025). So, let children play instead of “being told to sit still and reel off facts” (LEGO, 2018, Jefferson, 2020).



Children and Indigenous Play

Westernisation has blinded African eyes that we see nothing worthwhile in our values any longer. Before western playthings, African children have been playing. There are so many indigenous plays and games that enhance total development of African children. Pathetically, most of the indigenous plays are now strange to the young generations. Hence, Ajayi, Odejebi and Ajayi (2015), Olanrewaju and Ajayi (2025) established the efficacy of indigenous play and games on pupils' socio-cognitive development and called for the revitalisation of indigenous play and games in schools.

However, if children would play, there must be a play area where they can exhibit innate abilities/potentials in them.

e) ‘Where is my Playground or Open Spaces?’

This is another cry and longing in the heart of children in this age of modernization, digitalisation, urbanisation and so on. Children naturally love to explore in different environment. So, they need free spaces either indoor or outdoor. Playground is that physical space where children can play and express themselves without any inhibition. To adults, it is where children are to burn excess energy or to give adults a breathing space (parents or teachers). This is an erroneous perspective of playground from the adults’ world.

Learning environment is not limited to the classroom for children, playgrounds and open spaces are where their comprehensive development and learning are nurtured. (Ajayi, 2008; Ajayi, 2015; Woodliffe, 2025; Stride, 2025). Hence, playground is many things to children. It is referred to as microcosm of the society, where they exhibit and learn skills that will stay with them for life (Morrow, 2024).

It is a ‘sanctuary’ where children feel safe, free, relax and protected to express their innate potential. It is a workstation where imagination comes alive, innovations are displayed and socialization is at its peak. Pathetically, the open spaces are no longer there, they have been converted to estate, shopping mall and the like by the adult world.



Fig. 17: Young African Children on the Playground. <https://www.alamy.com/>.

f) Where are playthings/toys for me to play with?

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir. This is also a deep concern in children's mind. Adults should realise that play materials such as toys are not items of amusement or to keep children busy, but learning instruments in their hands because every toy has its educative side. It is to be emphasised that children need playthings to facilitate the play and play behaviour in them. The play materials should of necessity be developmentally appropriate for their age, the type of play, the place of play. Most theorists and early childhood scholars such as Jean Piaget, Lev. Vygotsky, Maria Montessori, Froebel emphasised play material for children's active learning.

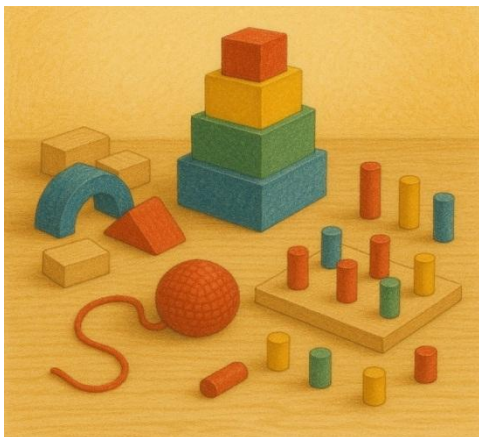


Fig. 18: Fredrich Froebel's Apparatus for Kindergarten. (AI – Generated Image)



Fig.19: Children playing with Froebel's materials

Studies have established their invaluable place in children's learning and development and not a distraction to learning (Teacher Institute, 2023; The Path of Learning, 2025; Ajayi & Popoola, 2018),

Where is my language?

With civilisation and westernisation, children have been ostracised from their cultural background. They cannot speak their language (mother tongue). In a bid to speak English fluently like the natives, children are hindered from acquiring their native language from birth. Rather, they wake up into speaking English language which ought to be learnt after the acquisition of mother tongue. It is worth noting that language is central to a child's sense of self, relationships, community values and traditional knowledge systems (Cummins, 2001). A scholar has once said that when people's language is taken away from them, what is left is just geographical and not a people. It is the language that makes a people unique (Odunlade, 2013). So, the inability of children to speak their mother tongue severed them from their cultural heritage and it resulted into their loss of their identity and privacy. When children cannot speak their mother tongue, a people is lost and there is no longer basis for shared history, narratives, ancestry and mythology (Ajayi, 2021). Gradually, such a people is at the verge of disappearing.

Hence, Ajayi (2025) in her work stated that for the continuity and sustainability of any people or society, the language must be upheld and passed down to their upcoming generation.

Who Am I? What is my identity?

The children are asking the question: ‘Who Am I’? What is my identity? It is because they are confused right from the early stage of life. Identity refers to the sense of who we are as an individual and as members of social groups (Blumenthal, 2022). Identity development commences at babyhood between 15 to 18 months, when they start recognizing themselves in photographs or mirror. From 18 months to three years, they begin to show preferences and make consistent choices. By ages three to five, they begin to internalize social messages from people around them through play and imitation. Between six to eight years, they develop self-concept expressing internal attributes like competence, personality, and feelings. The identity is shaped by upbringing, experiences, relationships and culture (Pfeifer, Berkman 2018; Lerner & Bornstein, 2025). But when the various environments that play significant roles in childhood identity formation are not safe or secure there would be identity crisis. When there is identity crisis, there will be emotional chaos, they may start questioning values, beliefs, goals, lack direction and life purpose as well as shifting identity (Waterman, 1984; University of Phoenix, 2025).

By the time they become adolescent, they become rebellious to authority at different quarters (Tillman, nd.; Erikson, 1968). Ajayi and Odejebi (2016) examined children’s language identity in Southwestern Nigeria and found that the children loved to identify with their cultural language if the environments were supportive. In another study, Ajayi (2022) examined children’s knowledge of their cultural background. It was discovered that though a sizeable number know the name of their hometown, they have never gone there. The reasons provided for not going were absurd. The study concluded that there is cultural bankruptcy because

children have lost their cultural origin, The study recommended that children should be given back their cultural identity.

Why is my Environment Hostile to me?

Here is another distress in the mind of children. Children have lots of potential in them that can only blossom in a safe, and secure environment - home, school, community and other environments. In a hostile or toxic environment, it is impossible for the potential to blossom. Any context that compromises children's well-being, development is a toxic or hostile environment.

So, exposing children to any form of discrimination as a result of their gender, socio-economic backgrounds, disabilities, intellectual capability and the like, shows a hostile or toxic environment. This was corroborated by Lawal and Ajayi, (2021) study that discovered a significant relationship between parental separation and emotional behaviour of pupils with the outcomes like in other studies as: impaired emotional regulation, poor academic outcomes, depression and mental health issues (Lawal & Ajayi, 2021; UNICEF, 2023; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020).

g) I am ME and not Another Person. Let me BE!!!

This is childhood cry for the identification of their uniqueness, autonomy (not in terms of indulgence) and respect for individuality. The children are lamenting against adult-imposed expectations, social conformity, and developmental pressures that often suppress children's unique voices. The children are calling for 'the right to exist as a unique individual', freedom from adult projections and being forced into a version of what others want. They cry for emotional and psychological autonomy. When supportive opportunities are not given, the imposed identity will lead to confusion and resentment.

Children are not allowed to BE through their exposure to standardized testing, assessment and curriculum pressures. Ajayi (2019) discovered that assessment procedure in schools were not developmentally appropriate in that it was basically paper – pencil procedure. Assessment at this period should cover all the domains of development with regular documentation of process rather than the product. In the light of this, Ajayi and Gbenga- Akanmu (2020) stressed in their work that the right assessment of children will produce the right development in children and called for suitable action from all stakeholders.

Again, children are being hindered to be who they are by the rigid behavioural norms which are deeply rooted in cultural contexts, religious beliefs or societal expectations. For instance, gender stereotype, of boys being preferred to girls or boys being expected in certain professions and girls in others is detrimental to the functionality of children, especially girl-child. This is condemned in Ajayi (2012) in her study where females were found to be at the low percentage in leadership roles as compared to men. Factors such as educational attainment, political inclination, cultural/ social and self- esteem were found to be responsible for low participation of women. It is concluded that the girl – child education should be taken more seriously. It was concluded that girl – child should be exposed to opportunities early in life that will enhance their abilities to develop confidence, self-esteem and leadership traits.

Parental comparison is another causative factor to this childhood outcry. When parents keep telling their children, ‘You are not like ‘Lagbaja’ It does a grave harm to childhood development because they will internalise the statements of comparison. These pull down the self-esteem of children and create anxiety. Such statements can result in identity crisis, depression and mental health as well as relationship issues in later life (Erikson, 1968; Bowlby, 1988; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Mruk, 2006).

It has to be emphasised therefore that every child is unique and develop at their own pace. Parents should bear in mind that to keep comparing children with others, is a ticking bomb that may explode in adolescence.

Hence, the childhood lamentation is a call to all stakeholders to celebrating their uniqueness and, ‘Let ME be! Only provide enabling environments at home, in school, in the community and in the larger society that will help ME thrive!!’

Early Childhood Education as a Field of Study

This is a specialised field within education that focuses on the care, learning, and development of children from birth through about eight years. It is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses a wide range of knowledge areas such as child psychology, pedagogy, developmental science, sociological aspect of the child, curriculum development, health, social policy among others. It equips professionals with the theoretical and practical skills needed to enhance children’s holistic growth and development across all domains of development at the most formative years of life. It also emphasises evidence-based practices, child-centred teaching methods, assessment strategies, and advocacy for children’s rights and well-being.

Graduates of Early Childhood Education are prepared to work in diverse contexts including schools, childcare centres, family support services, community programmes, research institutions, and policymaking bodies. The field also plays a critical role in advancing equity, inclusion, and sustainable educational practices in society.

Erroneous Views about Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education as a course of study is often misunderstood and undervalued. Some of the common erroneous views are:

1. It is just babysitting or child-minding course

Many people assume that studying Early Childhood Education merely prepares one to watch over children, feed them, or keep them occupied. This notion overlooks the intellectual, developmental, and pedagogical expertise required to activate meaningful learning experiences in early years (Pence, & Nsamenang, 2008; Katz, 2015; Bredekamp, 2019; NAEYC, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

2. Anyone can do it; there is no need for formal training.

It is viewed that teaching young children requires no specialised knowledge. So, anybody can teach children. It is important that whoever will teach children must understand child development, should be able to design age-appropriate learning environments, and handle diverse needs effectively. The question that may be asked is, 'Do you employ a tailor or a carpenter to build your house? This is absurd and it is considered interdepartmental illiteracy. Are we not a living witness to wrong personnel in early childhood education centres where they beat up children as if they are dealing with animals? Hope we have not forgotten Ikorodu saga. There are several unreported cases of such happening in our schools due to lack of understanding childhood and lack of appropriate training.

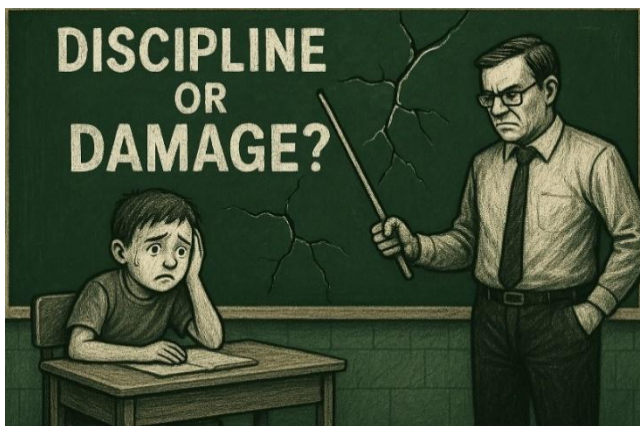


Fig. 20: AI - Generated

3. It is an easy or inferior course.

Some view ECE as less rigorous than other professional programmes like medicine, law, or engineering. This undermines the complexity of early childhood studies, which demand critical

knowledge of human development, curriculum, assessment, and research (Dalli, & Urban, 2010; Noddings, 2012; Moss, 2013; OECD, 2019; Bredekamp, 2019; Ajayi, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Early childhood education and medicine are two ends of the continuum, with ECE at the first end and medicine at the other end. While ECE is about building whole lives, medicine is about rescuing wounded lives. Why not build childhood well and reduce having wounded lives later on?

This most disheartening erroneous view about early childhood education was displayed some years ago by a notable scholar who said, and I quote, ‘Which parent will send his/her child/ward to the university for four years to come and study early childhood education’? This is highest level of ignorance at display from the gown that should inform the town.

We were also a laughing stock in the faculty at the early stage of this programme. I was teaching a class on a particular day, when a professor just strolled in with the intention of making jest and drove us out of the class to occupy the class. He faced the students and asked, ‘What course are you offering? The students chorused, ‘Early Childhood Education’. Then, he asked, ‘Are you enjoying the course? and the chorus again, ‘Yes, it is a great course’. He was dumbfounded and just left without another word. To the glory of God, some of the students that day are now Ph. D. holders as well as lecturers in this great institution and in other places. Ironically, the professor after many years sent his daughter to come and study the course he had once run down.

4. There are no serious career prospects in Early Childhood Education.

Many students shy away from ECE because of the belief that it leads only to low-paying jobs or limited opportunities. It is to be stated that the field offers broad and impactful career paths in teaching, curriculum development, policy-making, child advocacy, counseling, and academic research (Dalli, & Urban, 2010; Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012; OECD, 2019; Ajayi & Afolabi, 2019; Bredekamp, 2019; UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2022).

5. Early years do not matter; serious learning begins later.

This is an age-long notion that real education starts in primary school, while preschool is just a play stage. Research consistently proves that early years are the most critical for laying the foundation of literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, socio-emotional competence, and lifelong learning (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj, & Taggart, 2010; Heckman, 2017; Britto, Lye, Proulx, et.al, 2017; UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2022).

Let it be reiterated that neglecting early childhood stage is neglecting adulthood.



Fig. 21: Developmental Progression from Childhood to Old Age

If we refuse to give adequate attention to this level of development and education like Finland, Japan, Sweden, New Zealand, Norway and Denmark where the best brains are recruited to handle early learners, we are going nowhere in Nigeria. The early childhood programme in those countries adopts play-based learning, child-centred, inclusivity approaches and deploy teachers with not less than master degree to teach in their early childhood education centres (Mosher, 2023; Beatrice, 2025;) with the view to building a solid foundation for the upcoming generations and for better future. Professionals are therefore prepared in the various aspects of child development so that they can work with young children and their families to ascertain

holistic development of children (Ajayi & Afolabi, 2018; National University, 2025; UNESCO, 2024; University of North Dakota, 2024).

ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

Service to the Institute

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, since I joined the university, I have been functioning in the three tiers of academic- teaching, research and community service.

I became the director in 2023. During my tenure, all problematic results (Regular and Part-time; OAU & Affiliated colleges) were processed and got approved. The old Language Arts programme students who could not go on national service because of some hitches were cleared along with the sister's department (Arts and Social Science Education) and the students had completed their service year. The old Language Arts now Language and Communication Arts was verified and commenced in 2022/2023 Academic. In 2023/2024 Academic Session, Early Childhood Education Undergraduate programme commenced.

In the area of research, I have published seventy papers locally, nationally and internationally. I have also collaborated with colleagues locally, nationally and internationally to carry out research activities.

For community service, I have served as conference chairperson and conference secretary many times. I have organised seminars and workshops for proprietors of schools in the Institute. I initiated a mobile day care services when Institute had a large number of part-time students coming to write examinations at OAU Campus, Moro. The centre has metamorphosed into Child Care centre serving as the demonstration centre for Early Childhood Education students from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. I served as part adviser between 2007 and 2015 and involved in results processing at different times. I served as the managing editor of *Ife Journal of Theory and Research in Education* and *International Contemporary Issues in Education* from 2009 to 2021, and the Chief Editor for the two journals from 2023 till date. I

successfully supervised over 40 undergraduate students, over 30 Master by research, six Ph. D single-handedly and seven co- supervised. I served as chief examiners for 25 Masters and 15 Ph.Ds. I initiated two journals titled Ife Journal of Early Childhood Research (IJECEER) and Ife Journal of Language and Communication Arts (IJLCA).

I initiated the celebration of World Book Day in March 2025.



Fig. 19 – 34: Scenes of the 2025 World Book Day celebration at the Faculty of Education

During my tenure as the Director, two academic staff were promoted to senior lecturer cadre, one to professor and two were upgraded to lecturer 1. My tenure also witnessed the election of an academic member from the Institute to Vice Dean of the Faculty. During my tenure, Integrated Science Educators Association of Nigeria was launched and the first conference of the association was carried out with a huge success.

SERVICE TO THE FACULTY

I served as a member of the local organising committee of the 1st Faculty conference. I represented the Dean, Faculty of Education at the Faculty of Social Sciences in 2016. I am a

member of the Faculty Board since 2007. I have served in various committees in the Faculty such as postgraduate committee, Faculty Board of Examiners, Faculty Review committee and many more.

SERVICE TO THE UNIVERSITY

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, since my appointment in this prestigious citadel of learning in 2007, I have been teaching, researching and participating in community services that can project the image of the university locally, nationally and internationally. I was appointed to serve as the Head Teacher at Obafemi Awolowo University Staff School (Private) in April 2022 till September, 2023 when substantive Headmistress was appointed. During my tenure there, Primary 5 and 6 block was renovated, all wooden lockers and desks were replaced with modern lockers and desks, courtesy the Parent Teacher Association under the chairmanship of Dr. Pius K. Olayeni.



Figs 37 – 43: Renovated Primary 5 & 6 Block and Furniture

OAUSS Nursery Section

The Nursery Section was also renovated and equipped with educational and play materials courtesy the University Management under the chairmanship of Prof. Olubola Babalola (DVC, Academic).



Fig 44 - 50: Renovated Nursery Section with Educational Materials

I also resuscitated, ‘The Searchlight’, the school magazine that had gone moribund for years.

I initiated the celebration of ‘Play Day in Staff School for two consecutive years to promote play for healthy development in children.



Figs 51 - 52: 2024 Play Day Celebrated at OAUSS



Figs 53 – 57: 2025 Play Day Celebrated at OAUSS

I am currently elected as the Senate Representative to the Board of Obafemi Awolowo University Staff School (OAUSS) and still serving as the Director for another academic session.

Service to Other Institutions

I served as External Examiner to institutions within and outside Nigeria, namely University of Ibadan, Ibadan, University of Lagos, Lagos, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijebu Ode, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State University, Malete, University of Free State, South Africa, and University of Helsinki, Finland to mention but a few. I have served and still serving as reviewer to several international journals in early childhood education. I have served and still serving as chief editors to some reputable journals. I served as an adjunct lecturer to the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU) programme of the University of Victoria, Canada

in conjunction with the University of Ibadan, Ibadan to train Early Childhood Desk Officers in Nigeria.

Service to Other Agencies

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir. I served as a resource person to UNICEF, Federal Ministry of Education and National Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) in the process of writing Early Learning Standards, National Curriculum for early years, School Readiness document, and Road map for Early Childhood Development. I participated in the UNICEF trial testing of early learning standards tools in Ekiti State. I have also been a resource person to UBEC and involved in the training of UBEC desk officers. I facilitated training programmes for school owners for effective operation of early childhood programme in different states. I edited a book for an international publishing house. I am serving as a co-researcher with some other Early Childhood academia in four other nations – Hong Kong, United Kingdom, New Zealand and Austria.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, my indebtedness goes to the Almighty God who gives me life, turns my life around from grass to grace, and counts me worthy of the privilege not a right to be named among Professors in the great institution and globally.

My appreciation also goes to Obafemi Awolowo University Management by bringing me in to serve in different capacities and launching me into the global world as a researcher, reviewer, and examiner. Special thanks to the Vice Chancellor- Professor Adebayo Simeon Bamire for the opportunity provided to serve in my little way. The Lord will always remember you for good, sir. I appreciate the former Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic, Professor Olubola Babalola, who did not relate with me as boss but as a Sister. I will not forget to acknowledge the part played by the former Deputy Vice Chancellor Administration as well, Professor Abayomi Daramola - who after many years of applying for accommodation on campus got one

for me in 2022, and that reduced stress of being on the road all the time. So also, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research, Innovation and Development – Professor Ibukun Akanni Akinyemi - for inviting me into research activities for professional development. May you all not lose your rewards in Jesus' name.

Many thanks to all that accommodated me when I had no place to lay my head, immediate past Dean of my faculty, my sister and friend, Professor Theodora Olufunke Bello, Professor Cecilia Omobola Odejobi, who made me to sleep on the same bed with her. Also, Professor and Professor (Mrs.) A. J. Farinde, released their apartment for me. You will not lose your reward. My appreciation goes to all members of staff of the Institute of Education (academic and non-academic) for the lively atmosphere we shared together. Thank you so much for the cooperation I received from you over the years and more importantly while serving as the Director of the Institute. I do not underrate the support you gave me to make a success of the office. I specifically appreciate the non- academic staff for the advertorial did for me.



Special appreciation goes to my parents, Rev. (Pa). Michael Olutoye and Madam Deborah Oyindamola Ajiteru. I give God the glory for granting you the privilege to witness the fruits of your labour over me. When you struggled to pay my school fees then, little did you know that the Lord would grant me this rare privilege you witness today. My mother, thank you

for the way you handled me that very day I said, 'I don't want to go to school again' because we were trekking from Eleyele to Ibadan Municipal Government School, Mokola, Ibadan shortly after civil war. If you had handled it negatively then, only the heaven would have known where I would have been today.

I appreciate all my siblings and their families for the love we share together and your support for me in one way or the other towards reaching this stage.

My appreciation goes to the Ajayi's dynasty for support in one way or the other.

I appreciate my students numerous to mention, those who have graduated and those still on the programme for the time we share together. I say, 'keep being a voice to every child where ever you may be until the best interests of the child are upheld.

I cannot forget to appreciate the pupils of St. Peters African Church Primary School, Oyan where this love and passion was ignited.

Obafemi Awolowo University Staff School staff and pupils are amazing. I enjoyed every bit of the time I spent with them. I was pronounced a professor when I was with them. Who says children do not know anything? The whole school was in an uproar when the children heard the news. They trooped out, put me at the middle and they were dancing. After that day, it became an expression of pride among them, 'Do you know that our HM is a professor? Greater heights you will go in life.

My appreciation also goes to the founder, Executive and members of ECAN, FPCD, OMEP, Good Deeds for the advocacy of better treatment of childhood. We shall continue to be the voice for the voiceless till the lamentation of childhood is reckoned with.

I greatly appreciate my all my teachers from the foundation level to the peak of education, my supervisors at Master and PhD levels – Professor R. O. Akinbote (Baba ECAN) and Professor C. O. O. Kolawole, the Vice Chancellor of Trinity University, Lagos, and Professor Esther Oduolowu. Thank you for investing your time and patience in me. You have made this story sweet today.

Appreciation goes to the Trinity Baptist Church family, Ajobo, Igbooloyin Road, Ibadan and the Under-shepherd of the church Rev. (Dr.) and Mrs. Sam. Adeyemi and Abosede Akano for the hand of fellowship extended to me.

I acknowledge the Christ Ambassador Evangelistic Team (CAET) family, Basorun, Ibadan for their show of love. I appreciate my Class '77 Set, Anglican Grammar School, Otan Ayegbaju for the love extended to me.

Special appreciation goes to all my proof readers, the inaugural welfare committees, the rehearsal and technical crew, and my time keeper who worked tirelessly for the success of this inaugural, Dr. A. A. Adelokun, Dr. M. O. Omiyefa, Mrs. Tumininu Ifedayo Afolabi, Mr. Toluwanimi Ajayi, Mrs. Inioluwa Faith-Abiodun and Iyanuoluwa Ajayi, Dr. Taiwo Gbenga – Akanmu. Dr. Ibiwumi Ibironke Idowu, Dr. J. O. Salami, Dr. M. A. Omoyemiju, Prof. Lanre Idowu, Prof. J. O. Okewole, Mr. Akintayo and Stephania Olanrewaju, Tehila Oluwadunni Ajiteru, Mr. Kehinde and Mr. Dominic. My numerous students that I cannot be mentioning one after the other. Thank you so much for the efforts.

My appreciation goes to the Royal father of my hometown, Oba Lukman Adesola Fadipe, the Owa Olotan of Otan Ayegbaju. I was dumbfounded when Kabiyesi called me to congratulate me when my professorial status was announced. I had left my home town for more than two decades and to suddenly received a call from the Royal father really humbled me. Kaabiye o! K'ade pe lori, Ki bata pe lese, Ki irukeke di okinni lowo o. Thank you sir.



To my immediate family, words are not enough to express my gratitude to you- Professor Michael Adeniyi Ajayi, my love, my priest, prayer partner and academic guide- thank you so much for the journey so far. My inestimable jewels – Oluwatumininu- Ifedayo Afolabi, Shalom Toluwanimi Ajayi, IniOluwa Faith- Abiodun, and Iyanuoluwa Ajayi. Thank you for your endurance from my student days when you were young and we studied together to this day of delivering this inaugural lecture. You have taught me many things in parenting. May the Lord establish you the more in His love. To my sons, Ifedayo Afolabi and Faith Abiodun, thank you for being there always. May you continue to enjoy peace on every side.



To crown it all, I appreciate my adorable grandchildren – Oluwadabira and Owooluwatisisimi. You always inspire me with your smile, cry and different dispositions. One of such inspirations is what I am putting together in a book that I am working on. Here is ‘Gam, gam’ today saying, I love you.

To numerous people that have contributed in one way or the other to my success so far, I do not underrate your contribution. I am only limited by space to mention everybody. You will not lose your rewards here on earth and hereafter.

Conclusion

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, Childhood Lamentation is to everyone, parents, teachers, school owners, curriculum planners, the government and even researchers to give attention them.

Childhood cry for respect of their uniqueness, love, to be allowed to voice out what is on their mind and be listened to. Childhood cry for an enabling environment where they are safe, secure and nurture. Childhood cries for developmentally appropriate pedagogy and assessment that would enhance appropriate decisions on and about them. Let us all join hands to give childhood all it takes to be what they are meant to BE. Let us remember that paying attention to childhood is like banking for the future we all desire. Let us invest our time, our kind and cash into childhood and we will reap in multiple folds if we faint not, because



Take Home Message to All

Let's change the world – one little learner at a time'- World Forum on Early Care and Education.

'Together, We Can' – The World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. (OMEP)

Best interest of the child – Early Childhood Association of Nigeria (ECAN).

***To Him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy— To the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.
(Jude 1:24-25 NIV)***