

Nigerian Immigrant Mothers' Perspectives on the Universal Early Childhood Care and Education Programme in Ireland

Introduction

This article gives an insight into Nigerian immigrant mothers' perceptions of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in Ireland. Fifteen mothers whose children availed of the programme from 2020 to 2022 were recruited through ECCE settings to participate in doctoral research at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

The ongoing research, titled 'An investigation of the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrant mothers' engagement with their children's early childhood care and education', used a qualitative enquiry based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews. These were transcribed and coded using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2019; 2022).

The mothers were asked to share their experiences of parenting a child availing of the universal ECCE programme. They reported positive experiences: the findings indicate many benefits of the programme for Nigerian mothers and their children.

Universal ECCE programme

The ECCE programme was introduced in January 2010 by the Childcare Directorate of the then Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. It replaced the Early Childcare Supplement of €1,000 a year for preschool children aged three years and three months to four years and six months (Department of Education, n.d.; Taguma et al., 2010).



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This article summarises the findings of a study describing the views of Nigerian mothers on the many benefits of the universal Early Childhood Care and Education programme in Ireland. Without this programme, the participants probably would not have been able to send their children to preschool, return to work, or take up training, because of the high costs in Ireland.

The programme is a universal approach to free quality early childhood care and education to promote equality of educational opportunity and outcomes for children aged two years and eight months to five years and six months, before they begin primary school. It runs from September to June each year, and all young children in Ireland within the eligible age range are entitled to two full academic years before they enter primary school (Taguma et al., 2010). Through the programme, early childhood settings in Ireland such as playgroups, Montessori, Naíonraí, and crèches provide children with care and education for three hours a day, five days a week, for 38 weeks of the year (Health Service Executive, n.d.).

Benefits of the programme for the Nigerian mothers

The participants reported two main benefits of the programme for themselves: that their children receive free preschool education and learn from knowledgeable others.

They said the programme enabled them to avail of free childcare for three hours a day during the school year. They acknowledged that Ireland has high childcare costs – it is one of the highest among OECD countries (Russell et al., 2018) – and the programme allowed them to save money while they worked, engaged in training, or did other necessary tasks:

I'm not paying any money in the preschool or to get her to the Montessori, so it's totally free, and I really do appreciate that because it is saving me money, yeah.

It did give me an opportunity to go back to work. I had to stay off work for two years because I had both of them just in a space of one year. But with a free preschool coming into play, I was able to go back to work.

The participants said their children learnt from knowledgeable others in the preschool through the support from early years educators. They recognised this because they saw improvement in their children's growth and development since availing of the ECCE programme. They also said that this reduced their mothering stress or worries about their children's development:

Yeah, the benefit there is that at least it gives me rest of mind and it gives me less of stress. You know, what I would have been stressing myself to put in her, they already did part of it. So I'm just brushing it off.

Sometimes when you try to teach your own children as a mother, they tend to [be] like, I don't want to do it, and you can't really put much pressure on them, but the preschool is there to help.

Nigerian mothers reported two main benefits of the programme for themselves: their children receive free preschool education; their children learn from knowledgeable others.

Benefits of the programme for the children

The participants detailed three main benefits of the universal ECCE programme for their preschool children: socialisation, language development, and preparation for primary school.

They said the programme created opportunities for their young children to interact with their peers, which they found helpful for social and language development. They reported differences in their children's ability to socialise and make friends since availing of the programme:

It gives children that are born after a certain period of the year, not to just stay at home for a whole year and then not being able to do anything, the opportunity to be around their peers, people of their age.

I would say it's been helpful not just to me but also to the child, you know, socially. So sometimes the child might not be socially inclined, but then the preschool has kind of availed that opportunity for the child to be socially inclined and to be open to voice out, you know, their thoughts.

The participants said their children are more vocal and expressive since availing of the programme. They believed that this was because their children related with people in the preschool, which boosted their communication skills:

Her speech and everything had really improved.

She's much more outspoken in terms of language development than she was before, and I just believe that that's just an influence she got from being around her peers and knowledgeable others, especially with her teachers.

She's learning; she's communicating more, it really helped them in their talking.

The participants also said that the programme's timing and learning experiences and the preschool's classroom-like structure prepare their children for primary school. They believed that since their children were already used to the routine of the programme and the preschool set-up, this prepared them for primary school:

I think the preschool, it kind of set them up for things to come in the proper school, the main school. I have to kind of like get them into that routine, which is good.

It helps them more in going to school. So it gives them that sense that they are graduating from one step to another, and they are graduating to big school. So they are ready to go into big school.

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Conclusion

The universal Early Childhood Care and Education programme gave participants access to free childcare for three hours a day during the school year, which allowed them to save money. Moreover, it was established in this study that these free childcare hours helped the participants take up work and training. They said their children could express themselves confidently, were better prepared for primary school, and socialised well with their peers since availing of the programme.

Overall, the universal ECCE programme has significantly changed the lives of young children in Ireland and their families. A reduction in its age of entry could benefit more younger children in Ireland, especially disadvantaged and minority children, by giving them access to free, high-quality, and inclusive early years education.

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