FUNCTIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR VALUES, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Education is an acceptable instrument for change. Education is an important and crucial index to national development; it is the key to success in life and community development. The quality of education provided by Nigeria to her citizens will determine their economic, political, technological and social empowerment. This study is a position paper that delved into functional early childhood education for values, knowledge, skills and national development. A functional education inculcates the right attitudes, values, norms, abilities and skills in an individual to enable him function well in the society in which he belongs. This paper looked into the concept and scope of early childhood education, historical development of early childhood, the philosophical basis of early childhood and how functional early childhood education can bring about acquisition of knowledge, skills and inculcation of values for national development. Also some recommendations were made such as transmission of the culture of the society, effective citizenship etc.

The concept of education has been variously defined by scholars depending on their perception. However, the scope of education is so wide that specific definition and interpretation cannot be given to it. Despite this, an attempt would be made to give a working definition for education.

Keller (1980) defined education as “the process of teaching, training a child: the imparting or acquisition of skills for particular trade or profession in which applicable methods are used.”

Fafunwa (1983:17) defines education as “comprising all efforts, conscious and direct, incidental and indirect made by a given society to accomplish certain objectives that are considered desirable in terms of the programme is based.”

Taking the two definitions above as the basis, one will quickly understand that a functional education inculcates the right attitudes, values, norms, abilities and skills in an individual to enable him function well in the society in which he belongs.

Education all over the world is therefore a powerful instrument for the development of the man and society. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights provides among other things that everyone has a right to education.

This therefore supports the idea that children no matter the age have right to be educated, hence, childhood education.

Childhood Education

Childhood education is the education and training given to the child from the moment of birth to the period of adolescence. It starts from the time when the child is totally dependent on some other people for survival and the satisfaction of need to a time when he can survive on his own. Specifically, his period spans between 3 and 11+ years. Piaget (1952) classified it as the sensori-motor stage of development to the formal operational stage when the child begins to think logically and
rationally. This period can subdivided into two broad stages namely: the period from 3 to 5+ which is being referred to a period of early childhood and from 6 – 11+ known as period of later childhood.

**Early Childhood Education**

Piaget (1980) categorized child development into four main stages namely: Sensorimotor, Pre-operational, Concrete operational and Formal operational. Early childhood according to him has to do with the first two stages, the sensorimotor which spans through the first two years of a child’s life and Pre-operational (2 to 7 years). At these stages of development, the child is mainly able to form mental pictures of things (e.g. the child looks at things, hears and grasps at things seen). The child is just able to form a mental picture of things. Random movement gives way to goal seeking behavior. As the child grows towards the second year his/her understanding is based on what he sees in the immediate present. The child usually attributes life to inanimate objects, tries to communicate with use of symbols. He moves about more but within the environment, tries to be independent, has a short interest span, explores more than before. Vocal communication is more developed and the child makes a greater effort to socialize more than with the significant others such parents, caregivers and immediate relations. The child can express emotions such as fears, joy, anger, and anxiety. The child at this stage has the capability to achieve simple learning.

Today, the concept of early childhood education has been modified especially with the Nigeria situation where childhood by constitution extends to age 18; early childhood education is to mean the Piagetian concept of the term and the primary school years.

**Historical Development of Early Childhood Education**

Education began a long time ago. Long before there were schools, people taught their children what they needed to know for survival.

The idea of having children educated has been of the greatest interest to various people, societies and countries of the world. Note that the period from 1750 to 1910 marked the beginning of group concept in the education of the young children.

During this period schools were introduced to help solve the problems of poor conditions found among the children of poor working mothers. It was primarily for custodian purposes. As time went on, a period of enlightenment crept in the society began a renaissance in the field of education. Jean Rousseau (1712 – 1778) started nursery education in a formal setting in Switzerland and published a book called Emile in which he described the ideal way to bring up children. He emphasized the children should not be force into learning but should be gently led to learn practical things and to bring about their natural talents.

Johann Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827) brought together a group of homeless children in Switzerland and began to teach them based on Rousseau’s principles. He taught children through talking, playing and working. Teaching by Pestalozzi was so interesting that learning was an accomplished task. The progress made by his children astonished all who saw them.

In 1769 in Wallback France, John Oberline started an early nursery school which gave way to Ecoles Maternelles. Between 1982 – 1852, Frederick Froebel introduced the idea of kindergarten school in Germany. He made extensive use of toys and songs to teach children. In Scotland, Robert Owen organized an infant school in 1844 the first day – Nursery School in France started in 1896.

Maria Montessori started teaching retarded children in Italy and in 1907 started the first school in Rome for children between the ages 3 – 6 years.
Grace Owen and the Macmillan Sisters in 1908 launched out the Modern Nursery Movement in England. The Macmillan Sisters (Margaret and Raphael) opened the first school clinic in Bow while the first real nursery school started at Deptford in 1911. There were others who promoted the nursery school idea such as Lancaster, Kil-Patrick, Dewey in the United States of America.

**Early Childhood Education: The Nigeria Experience**

In the Nigeria society, early childhood education occurred even before schools were established. This type of education was largely informal. The new born child is considered to possess all that an adult has. This could be seen in the way adults treat the infant as though he understands. Education of the child therefore begins immediately he is born – starting with getting the child to move his muscles, throwing him up and down so that he could get used to sudden movements. He is helped to suck the mother’s breast and so on. As the child grows, he learns to adapt himself to what is happening with the environment and gradually develops a habit of independence and freedom. Occasionally he is left to do what he likes but under the supervision and watchful eyes of adult or older children. At the age of one and half years to three, cooperative play is dominant occupation of the child. Together with his group, they play with sand building dream houses, cook assorted food using tins, sand, available vegetables and flowers. Water play is an enjoyable part of play amongst children. It is pertinent to note through freedom to play with objects, the child gradually builds his self-concept, discipline and work orientation. This Maria Montessori recommends as the most important way of introducing motor education and self management.

In the traditional society, children are encouraged to imitate adult within the environment. They are exposed to domestic chores that suit their age namely: sweeping the floor, going to farm, looking after the younger ones etc. all these help our children to mature faster than children elsewhere and expose them to several activities early in life.

With the advent of colonialism, education was equally introduced to us by the missionaries. They trained people in different spheres of life but recently in the 1970s the concept of nursery education spread into the urban centres. Day-care centres, where infants below the age of two years are kept, were also opened. The purposes of these centres were very similar to those of the white men to give care to babies of working class mothers. From the day-care centres are attached nursery schools which are run in a more formal education through the use of various methods. These types of schools run for about 4½ hours per day.

There is a general belief by psychologist that an early start for young children gives them a better opportunity of grasping materials and learning faster than at a later stage. It is at this early stage that conceptual learning sets, interest, habit patterns are developed. Such learnings and habit pattern contribute a lot to the personality of the child in later years. This is in support of Fowler (1962) and Maduewesi (1989) conviction that the early years of the child is better than the later. They further went on to say that materials learnt at an early stage can facilitate those of the later years. The United State Educational Policies Commission (1960) in Universal Opportunity for Early Childhood Education was quoted in Evans (1971) that:

> A growing body of research and experience demonstrates that they the age of six most children have already developed a considerable part of the intellectual ability they will possess as adults.

However, not all psychologists agreed on the effects of early education. Kagan (1973) does not believe that early intellectual deprivation is an overwhelming obstacle to normal development. Sears and Dowley (1963) after a review of researchers in nursery education, concluded that attendance at nursery school, in and itself does not radically alter personalities of children. Whatever
the line of argument, it is necessary to know that early stimulation of the child intellectually serves a better opportunity for later intellectual development of the child. The syndromes of nursery schools have come to stay with us as a result of the need to give our children a functional education for nation development.

**Theoretical Basic of Early Childhood Education**

In relation to early childhood education, a lot of people have had their own philosophy of what pre-primary education should be. Some of these people were Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, Williams Kilpatrick, Frederick Froebel, Maria Montessori and John Dewey. To look at the philosophy of these people will be pertinent to the subject under discussion.

Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980) was a Swiss psychologist. He believed that children needed to continually interact with their environment in order to learn and go through a sequence of intellectual development.

Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) was the founder of psychoanalysis. His emphasis was on the power of unconscious motivation. It was based on motions instead of the rational and he also believed that childhood experience was not just the child but the adult personality.

William Kilpatrick (1871 – 1965) was an American Professor in education. He emphasized that life experiences significantly contributed to a child’s education. He defined learning as living.

Frederick Froebel (1782 – 1852) was a German educationist who fathered the kindergarten movement. His emphasis was on encouragement rather than repression of the child. He laid emphasis on the central importance of child activity and creative play.

Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) was the first female medical doctor in Italy. She was internationally recognized as a pioneer of progressive infant education. She designed a school environment and apparatus that stressed sensory experience and physical activity with learning materials of various types. These were materials devised to fall in with the child’s developing intelligence and skills.

Having looked at the different philosophies, we can see that their ideas have in one way or another influenced the present day schools. Froebel and Montessori based their philosophy on the need for experience and participation in activities which act as aids to develop intelligence and skills in the children.

**The National Policy on Education and Early Childhood Education**

Every nation has a policy on education which guides the government on the type and quality of education that her citizens should acquire. This policy spells out the objective that can be achieved using education as a tool. In Nigeria five main national objectives are stated in the second national development plan and endorsed as the necessary foundation for the National Policy on Education. These are the building of:

1. A free democratic society
2. A united, strong and self reliant nation
3. A just and egalitarian society
4. A great and dynamic society
5. A land of bright and full of opportunity for all citizens
As stated above, early childhood education does have some objectives. The National Policy on Education, section 2 (2004) states the following purposes for the education of children aged 3 to 5 years prior to entering primary school to be:

1. Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school
2. Preparing the child for the primary level of education
3. Providing adequate care and supervision to the children while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the market, office etc)
4. Inculcating social norms
5. Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities etc.
6. Teaching co-operative and team spirit
7. Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play
8. Teaching good habits, especially good health habits

From the above discussion, we can see that functional early childhood education is to inculcate the right attitudes, values, norms, abilities and skills in an individual to enable him function well in the society in which he belongs. This can only be done through values, knowledge, skills and national development.

Educating the child for the values is no simple task. The responsibility for value development is shared by the school, the home, organized religion and various agencies of the community. Value and valuing processes are related to the moral development of children (Berman, 1999).

The Home: It is the responsibility of the home to inculcate the right values in the child, as the home is the very first agent of socialization which the child comes into contact. The parents are the most important persons in the live of the child. It is the place of the home to provide socially approved values and norms for the training of the child that will make him function well in the society, if the right values are inculcated in the child, the child will be able to function well in the school, community and the society at large as stated in the national policy on education, inculcating social norms. In this age and time when value is eroding the society, parents, caregivers, and relations should instill good values in the child which will enable him relate purposefully in the society in future.

The School: The home is the initial education ground of the child. Although most of the knowledge required by the child is already given at home, the school is the most conducive environment for the child to learn. The school plays the role of culture transmission. The total ways of life, the social norms and values, science, religion, art and philosophy of the given society are imparted in the children in the school. A child in the early stage of his education needs to identify with the culture of his people; hence, this will make the child function well in future if he is well equipped by the teacher. He will be useful to himself, his family and the society at large.

The Community: The community includes the home, the school and others. In traditional Africa, the child belongs not just to a particular parent, but to all within the community. The home transmits vital attitudes, trains the child in basic habits and serves throughout childhood as a translator of cultural norms and values which the child is exposed to outside as well as inside the home. The school complements the training as part of the community. Its norms and values assessment of the adequacy of a child’s behavior should be seen in the light of the requirements of the society as a whole. To this end, teachers act as assessors of children’s behavior. It is their responsibility to provide parents with valuable information about areas that should be emphasized to the child.
Under the community is the church. An observation of the present day nursery school, kindergarten and day care centres shows that the church is involved in the education of the child at the formative age. The education given to children in schools run by churches is in line with that of private effort but emphasis is placed on sound moral training according to Gaeblain (1994), education in church oriented schools is by nature dedicated to changing those who are taught for the national development.

Conclusion

Education all over the world is a powerful instrument for the development of man and the society. The role of education in the life of an individual, a family, a community, a nation, state and entire human community cannot be over emphasized. Education in Nigeria is seen as an instrument “per excellence” for effecting national development.

Functional early childhood education is to inculcate the right attitudes, values, norms, abilities and skills in an individual to enable him function well in the society in which he belongs. This can be done through values and skills acquisition for national development that is, the education the child acquired in early childhood can make him upright in the society and function as a good citizen. According to the national policy on education, inculcating social norms and also teaching co-operation and team spirit.

Moral values and norms must be inculcated in the child by the home, school, community, and religious body etc. for the child not to derail and also skill acquisition for the child to function maximally in the society.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations that would enable functional early childhood education to achieve the above:

1. **Transmission of the Culture of the Society:** Teachers and caregivers should emphasize on transmission of culture, good morals and values must be achieved as they teach.
2. **Effective Citizenship:** The school, home, community and religious bodies should inculcate high sense of morality in the youths to ensure order in the society and mutual support for one another and respect for constituted authority.
3. **Life Long Education:** Knowledge acquired in early childhood education should embrace all aspect of life; according to Castle (1968) … education is the preparation for living in the society in which we are born.
4. **Teaching Methods:** Teaching methods should be by observation, imitation, story telling, role playing, recitation, riddles and demonstration. Much of the knowledge and skills gained by the children are through imitation. The play engaged by the children will help them to develop their physique and their brains as well as strengthening their power of observation and creativity.

References


