

## THE NATIONAL POLICY ON LANGUAGE IN NURSERY EDUCATION: REAPPRAISAL OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION

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### Abstract

The paper discussed the issue of language in Nigeria's Policy on early childhood/pre-primary education. After highlighting the need for nursery education in relation to language, the paper went on to overview the National Policy provisions on the purpose, content and guidelines for implementation. Then attention is shifted to the reappraisal of the implementation of the Policy provisions so far. From the reappraisal, it can be seen that, though Nigeria has one of the best-articulated policies to guide its educational practices, especially at the pre-primary level, there is still much to be done to ensure more effective implementation of the Policy. While the Federal Government should get more directly involved in nursery education through more strict and regular supervision, other stakeholders, including school boards, schools, parents and teachers, should step up their efforts by adhering strictly to the Language Policy guidelines so as to play their respective roles effectively.

### Introduction

It is obvious from history that prior to Nigeria's independence in 1960, there was virtually no Government involvement in pre-primary education. Hence there is no documented evidence of any official policy serving as guidelines for nursery education in Nigeria. The colonial officials must have used privately organized nursery classes (in their compounds or church premises) for their children. They also gave a few Nigerian elites some chances (as special privileges) to benefit from such arrangements. Thus, this level of education was for the privileged few and can be described as informal since it was

not an integral part of the formal educational system.

As people were getting more enlightened, especially after independence, many Nigerians started realizing the need for early formal education for their children. This need and desire on the part of parents and guardians, however, did not get much official backing until the 1969 National Curriculum Conference that gave rise to the first edition of the National Policy on Education in 1977. As stated in the Policy (NPE, 2004, p.4), "*The need for a national policy on education came about as a result of the 1969 National Curriculum Conference, which was attended by a cross-section of Nigerians*".

As a follow-up, the Federal Government organized a National Seminar in 1973 for the purpose of articulating a National Policy Education. This seminar confirmed the realization that there was a yawning gap in this area of our national life. There was the dare need for a serious rethinking and necessary action. There was real need for an indigenously conceived and structured national policy to guide our educational practices.

Since its maiden edition in 1977, the Policy has undergone various editions – 1981, 1989 and 2004).

Notably, the Policy covered various levels of the Nigerian educational system, including Pre-primary (nursery) Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, Higher Education including Professional Education, Technical Education, Adult and Non-Formal Education, Special Education, and Teacher Education. However, our concern in this paper is those of Pre-primary and Primary levels with

emphasis on the language aspect of the policy. Please note that the 2004 edition of the National Policy refers to pre-primary level as 'Early Childhood/Pre-primary Education'.

In this paper, we have organized the discussion by first examining the relevant policy contents, followed by their implementation guidelines and then appraisal of their implementation so far based on some available empirical evidence, common experiences and observations.

### **National Policy on Early Childhood/Pre-Primary Education**

The relevant provision, presented below, can be found in Section 2 of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004, p.11). Please note that the provisions relevant to language have been highlighted for emphasis:

11. Early childhood/Pre-primary education as referred to in this document is the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 years plus prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten.
12. The responsibilities of government for pre-primary education shall be to promote the training of qualified pre-primary schoolteachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable curriculum and supervise and control the qualities of such institutions.

### **Purpose of Pre-Primary Education**

13. The **purpose** of pre-primary education shall be to:-

- (a) Effect smooth transition from the home to the school; (b) Prepare the child for the primary level of education; (c) Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work, (on the farms, in the market, offices, etc); (d) Inculcate social norms; (e)

Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys etc; (f) Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit; (g) Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and (h) Teach the rudiments of numbers, **letters**, colours, shape, forms etc through play.

As Implementation Guidelines, the policy states that:

### **14. Government shall**

- (a) Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education; (b) Make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education; (c) Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will: (i) Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages, and
- (ii) Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages. (d) Ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this, regulate and control the operation of education. To this end the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:25; (e) Set and monitor minimum standard for early childcare centers in the country; and (f) Ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities.

### **The Need for Nursery Education in Relation to Language Development.**

There is no gainsaying the fact that, by the provisions of this Policy, the Federal Government of Nigeria has demonstrated its recognition of the importance of pre-primary or nursery education for Nigerian children. Nigerian

citizens and the Government are aware of the vital need for pre-school education in this country. Experience has shown how the provision of stimulating environment for the pre-school children greatly improved their cognitive skills and abilities, eventually leading to improvement in their intellectual development in later years. And there is a close relationship between language and cognition (Durojaiye, 1976). According to him, some studies reveal that verbal mediation is necessary in intellectual activities; and verbal mediation depends on the learner's level of language development. Also, Momoh-Olle (1998, p. 200) agrees that there is a enough evidence supporting the fact that "children who attended nursery schools perform better than those who did not..."

With regard to language, it is important to emphasize that the nursery is the foundation of the child's formal education where language and other abilities are developed under organized learning environmental conditions. While Hurlock (1978) asserts that language plays a crucial role in children's academic achievement, Ozigi and Conham (1978) agree that it is important for all learning, Furthermore, Conger, Mussen and Kagan (1974) emphasize that language is normally involved in thinking, memory abilities, reasoning, problem-solving, planning and organization. As a result, the laying of the foundation for the child's personality (including language) development should start from the nursery stage of formal education.

#### **Implementation of the Pre-primary Language Policy**

It is necessary to point out from the outset that that the Federal Government plays a non-participatory (but merely supervisory) role in pre-primary education, going by the above policy provisions. In fact, Momoh-Olle (1998, p.203) has noted that instead of formulating a policy, which empowers it to establish and control nursery schools, the Government

formulated the one that allows it to "encourage" non-governmental organizations to establish and run nursery schools. For this reason, there is no nursery institution in the country specifically established and run by the Federal or State Government to serve as a model for the private ones to follow. Instead, however, A few Government-owned primary schools have "staff schools". In some places nowadays, some primary schools have pre-primary or nursery sections. In this type of situation, it will not be an overstatement to say that the different levels of Government only exercise indirect control with regard to the implementation of the pre-primary education policy.

In this type of situation, how can the Government monitor the implementation of the Language aspect of the policy?

Finding the answer to this question is not far fetched. In a study by Ogbonna and Ogbonna (2007), it was discovered that 100% of the respondents indicated that English was the medium of instruction in the nursery schools under study. This is contrary to the policy provision, which stipulates the medium of instruction in nursery schools should be the children's mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment or community.

It was noted by the researchers in their report that the problem of poor implementation of the language policy lies in the lack of effective supervision by the Government. In the study, it was found that none of the respondents indicated that either Federal or State Government had supervised the schools under study for a long time. It should be obvious that their opinion could have been based on the fact that they had not had any such experience as receiving visitors called State or Federal educational inspectors. However, other results in the study showed that 100% of the respondents admitted that Local Government/Zonal Office personnel came for supervision, while 60% of them indicated that Private respectively undertook the or

“inspection” of the institutions. Regarding how often such supervision or “inspection” took place, those who stated that it took place once a year were 19% while those who said that it took place termly were 6%. However, when asked whether the inspectors queried the language they used as the medium of instruction, no respondent indicated that any inspector mentioned that during their visits.

### **Language and Communication in Nursery Schools**

One of the notable policy provisions with regard to nursery education is that it should serve the purpose of helping children to have “a smooth transition from the home to the school.” According to Adeniyi (2006), many pre-primary institutions have teachers’ aids and assistants called “helpers who are surrogates of mothers at home. Such ‘helpers’ give helping hands to the children whenever they want to ease themselves, they are hungry and want to eat, and when they have taken ill. These services make the children feel at home...”. The experiences of the authors indicate that these “helpers” use English throughout when communicating with the children. When asked why they do so, they made it clear that they would be in trouble (from the school authority) if they did otherwise. Since these “helpers” are seriously deficient in both spoken and written English, one wonders what can be the fate of the children they are “influencing” language-wise.

Another provision is that the nursery is used to “Prepare the child for the primary level of education”. Mommoh-Olle (1998) and Adeniyi (2006) support the view that, so far in Nigeria, pre-primary education has gone a long way in making children cope with the demands of the primary school programmes. Adeniyi (2006) believes that “children that pass through this (pre-primary) level of education are able to express themselves clearly and generally do

better in primary schools than those who did not”.

It is necessary to point out here that this is one of the lures – “express themselves clearly and generally do better...”. The question is, “Express themselves clearly” in which language? And how effectively? In fact, this problem of using English is carried over to the primary school stage where the policy suffers even worse violation.

The provision concerned with Inculcating Social Norms is even culturally critical; and language is the tool for cultural transmission from one generation to another. Children in pre-primary schools are expected to imbibe good cultural values and social habits such as greeting, cooperating with peers, respect for elders, seniors and superiors as represented by teachers, caregivers and aids/helpers. They also imbibe such good habits as using language politely when making requests. Here again, experience has shown that in most of the nursery schools visited, English is used in inculcating these values and habits. In this type of situation, since language is a tool for cultural transmission, the question arises as to whether we are nursery education to transmit English or Nigerian indigenous people’s culture.

However discussions with some of the headmasters and headmistresses revealed that despite using English as a medium, they had been able to inculcate honesty and truthfulness among the virtues and desirable habits in the children. And we cannot dispute the fact that these are very highly cherished values in the Nigerian social milieu characterized by cultural diversity.

Coming to “Inculcating in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical instruments, etc. Almost all the teachers interviewed saw the use of any other language than English as impossible. They cannot see how

certain concepts in pre-primary science can be rendered in any other language than English.

Although Adeniyi (2006) noted that “nursery schools in Nigeria have, to some extent, helped children to learn to observe, ask intelligent questions and talk about people, things and events happening around them”, he did not say in what language these take place. We cannot ignore the assertion by Idris (1994) that “psychologically, the proper development of the child is closely bound with continued use of the language he has spoken from birth, the language of his parents, his brothers and sisters, friends and people he is used to” In other words, it is the language in which the child has acquired his first experiences in life. It is the language in which the child dreams and thinks, and in which he can easily and conveniently express himself. It is only in the language a child can use easily that he can show evidence of self-reliance, confidence, self-esteem, readiness to talk about nature, listen to, reproduce or tell stories. Language competence enhances the child’s aptitude for other creative activities like producing poems, rhymes, songs, as well as drawing and painting. A child who is able to achieve all these in the nursery school because he has the language power can go further in his educational career with much confidence.

Another aspect of the policy provision that has implication for language development is Developing a sense of co-operation and team spirit. – A child needs to develop a sense of co-operation, which is a social behaviour and habit, which a child needs in order to live happily in the society made up of other human beings. This social aspect of the child is developed as a process of socialization in which the child learns by playing and engaging in other activities that require that groups involving him and his mates must work together in order to achieve set objectives.. The child invariably learns to do things or work with others for the achievement of common goals. Such social activities as

birthday parties, whether celebrated in the school (as some institutions encourage children to do) or at home by inviting mates, help in this aspect of social development. As children interact among themselves in these situations, their language development is being positively influenced.

Play among children is related to social development as discussed above. Hence, when the National Policy’s provision of Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play, the development and use of language is implicated. For instance, whether we are teaching and learning mathematics or science, appropriate language is involved. It is when children can use appropriate language to express themselves in given learning situations that we can agree with Adeniyi(2006) when he states that “Many nursery school children are able to: differentiate and identify pictures, shapes and colours within their competence, use writing tools and materials correctly; identify letters of the alphabet A to Z and recognize the number symbols 1 to 100.”

One of the areas where registers (language used in special environments) abound is the medical profession. So, for children to Learn good habits, especially good health habits in accordance with the policy, they have to learn and understand the language used in the health environment, at least, at their own level.

It was during the visit that some health habits were obviously exhibited by children in nursery schools visited, indicating that the language used in the inculcation was effective: Safety precautions as essential habit while engaging in both harmful or risky and non-harmful activities such as play or recreation and any other kind of physical exercise like sports and games: Observing rules of hygiene like washing hands well before and after eating; Making sure that finger nails are always kept clean; Washing hands and cleaning relevant parts of the body

well after using the toilet; Keeping clothes and shoes clean always; Taking care of the hair.

**Factors Militating against the Proper Implementation of the Provisions of the Pre-Primary Education Policy as it Affects Language:**

The following are among the observable factors militating against the successful implementation of the National Policy on Pre-primary Education in the country. These have both direct and language implications:

i.. The National Policy (NPE, 2004, pp.11-12) implies that the role of the Government is supervisory and giving “encouragement”, as against being participatory. The Government (at the Federal, State and Local Government levels) should be seen to be performing the supervisory role effectively. The result of a study carried by Ogbonna and Ogbonna (2009) earlier cited which revealed that the Government has not been playing its role as expected is not encouraging. It is important that the Government that formulates the policy and develops the “relevant curriculum”, should take active part in the implementation. The idea of leaving everything about the establishment and running of schools (especially nursery schools) in the hands of private organizations, that is, “private efforts” (NPE, 2: 14a), is not an ideal situation. Even the Government’s stated role to “supervise and control the quality of such institutions” cannot be said to be successfully performed. In the study quoted earlier, Ogbonna and Ogbonna (2009) noted that no respondent indicated having seen any Federal or State supervisors in their institutions.

ii. In the Policy, the Government promised the “provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education”. Such specialization on the part of teachers at this level would make them tackle language issues properly and effectively. Unfortunately, this has not received the desired implementation attention. In some teacher training institutions in the country, the relevant department to prepare such specialist teachers does not exist, or, at best, is just starting. There are living evidences based on the authors’ experiences

iii. One of the most neglected, if not abused, of all the provisions of the National Policy is that of language of instruction. According to the Policy (NPE Section 2(c)), the language of instruction at this level should be the mother tongue. However, Ibiam (1998, p. 128) found out in a study that “the instructions given in the National Policy are not being adhered to”. There is “a laissez-faire attitude to this policy” making pre-primary schools to be using English as a medium of instruction throughout, that is in all the classes. By the year 2007 when Ogbonna and Ogbonna’s (2007) carried out their own investigation the situation had not changed as their findings corroborated that of Ibiam.

Also, whether at the pre-primary or other levels, “The National Policy on language in education has been one of the most difficult policy provisions to be implemented in the country. For instance, many pre-primary and primary schools in the country use English as the medium of instruction” (Ogbonna, Ushie, Lubis and Mustapha, 2003, p.252)) One militating factor, according to them, is that what is known as mother tongue is difficult to ascertain in many places in the country where

some children grow up using English as their first language or are already multi-lingual because of the social nature the environments in which they grow up.

Particularly, the causes of the noticeable poor implementation of the Language aspect of the Policy can be traced to the following two major factors:

- In the urban and semi-urban areas where most schools are cited, there is a plurality of mother tongues among the children. These children come from different linguistic backgrounds. The teacher himself may have come from only one of the linguistic backgrounds. Even when the option is to go for the “language of the immediate environment”, the teacher(s) and the children themselves may not be commonly conversant with what has been chosen as the language of the immediate environment in their area. This is a serious problem too. The only workable lingua franca in such situations would be English. There would be no second choice, especially against the backdrop of the role English language is playing in other spheres of the peoples’ lives, including in politics, commerce and social interactions.

- There is this belief by many Nigerian parents that the standard of educational institutions can only be measured by the ability to make children and wards to acquire proficiency in spoken and written English. Ironically, parents and guardians do not worry even if their children cannot speak or write their own mother tongue. So, such parents usually express satisfaction with and appreciation for such institutions for making their children to achieve what they have sent them to school to do – learning to speak and write English. In fact, it has been found from the authors’ experiences and interactions with some parents that this is one of such parents’ major purposes for sacrificing to send their children to private nursery (and sometimes primary) schools that are often expensive. Such parents believe that the sacrifice is worth it, since, according to

them, the affected children would soon be speaking and writing English better than other children who did not have the opportunity to pass through such (nursery) schools.

(iv) There is no confirmed evidence that the efforts of the Government to “develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages” have been yielding the much-desired fruits. The difficulty in assessing the progress in this aspect of the Policy arises from the fact that the Policy gives room for the use of the “language of the immediate environment”.

“The language of the immediate environment” has lent itself to multiple and sometimes confusing interpretations by different people. Many people, including school authorities and teachers, interpret this to mean any of the “three major Nigerian languages”. Hence, in Northern Nigeria including the Middle Belt Zone, Hausa is such a language. In the South East it is Igbo. In the South West it is Yoruba. And in the South South, there are so many contending options depending on the locality including Effik, Ibibio, Edo, Urobo, Yoruba, Igbo and many others.

We can see that while the language of instruction using indigenous languages may not present problems in some areas where the majority speak the same language, in some places the problem can be as complex as the type experienced in urban and semi-urban areas.

v. Government proposed to “ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this, regulate and control the operation of education. To this end, the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:25.”

We should note that this provision is capable of enhancing the effectiveness of language development in children.. Language is social in nature since it is the core of interaction and communication. Play is a social activity in which children express themselves freely using various forms of communication including

language. Using play as a methodology can easily be noticed in most of the nursery schools visited by the authors as earlier reported. From experience and observations by the authors, this is one of the most adhered to or implemented of the pre-primary policy provisions.

vi. Monitoring or supervision is an essential aspect of policy implementation. The Government is “to set and monitor minimum standard for early childcare centres in the country”. Monitoring can only serve its purpose if educational stakeholders see supervision as a serious undertaking. Is it not through that the Government can ascertain whether its own Language Policy in Pre-primary education is being implemented or not?

It has earlier been noted that, in relation to pre-primary education, the Government at all levels have not taken this aspect of the National Policy as seriously as it deserves. Could the reason be that since pre-school education has been made a private affair going by the relevant policy provision, the Government finds it difficult to “interfere” directly with what it does not actually own despite its power to “regulate and control the operation of education”? This may explain the finding of Ogbonna and Ogbonna (2009) that neither Federal nor State governments undertook the supervision of these privately owned pre-primary schools.

### **Conclusion**

There is no gainsaying that Nigeria has one of the most well articulated educational policies at all the levels starting from the pre-primary to the tertiary level. The problem has always been that of implementation.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing discussion and conclusion, it is hereby recommended that: Though the Government has made various notable efforts for the effective implementation

of the relevant policy, it should not relent in making greater efforts especially in the areas of funding and monitoring or supervision.

Other stakeholders that should play their various roles creditably to make pre-primary or nursery education a worthwhile enterprise in the country include: Ministries of Education at the State and Federal levels, Local and State School Boards, Universal Basic Education Commission, other Education related agencies, relevant communities, school administrators, teachers and parents.

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