
EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN YORUBA CULTURE: A PARADIGM OF FOUNDATION FOR FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION FOR VALUES, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The imperative of functional education for values, knowledge, skills and national development cannot be over emphasized. It is in the light of this that this paper takes a look at Early Childhood Care and Education in traditional Yoruba Society as a typical example of employing Early Childhood Care and Education as foundations for functional education which culminate into national development. The paper highlights care, affection, guidance and discipline as strategies for preparing children for future functional education. The major tools employed by the society in focus which include lullaby, songs, folktales, names and panegyrics, rhymes and the like are also exemplified. The paper concludes that these strategies can serve as models in laying a solid foundation for functional education for values, knowledge, skills and national development.

A well built house started from the foundation. Likewise, a big, long, and fruitful tree started from the foundation which was the planting and germinating period. A weak foundation of either the building or the tree may lead to the eventual collapse or death of the building and the tree respectively.

Quoting Aristotle, Yusuf (1996:27) stated that a “full grown mango tree is the manifestation of the potentialities contained within the seed.” In the same manner, a functional education for values, knowledge, skills and national development starts from the child’s formative years. Right from the womb, the child has to be nurtured properly to guarantee a proper adulthood, otherwise, the intended functional education becomes a mirage.

In the light of these importance of the root to the plant, and the foundation to the main building which are analogous to the importance of the child’s formative years to

his/her adult life, this paper takes a look at the imperative of having well-brought up children as a basis for future functional education.

Using Early Childhood Care and Education (henceforth, ECCE) in traditional Yoruba society as a reference point, the paper brings to the fore the practice in the aforementioned society as models of ECCE.

The paper is delineated into various parts starting with the introduction after which the clarifications of concepts germane to the study were dwelt upon. Subsequently, the paper focuses on the ECCE of the society under reference. Attempts were made to replace aspects found to be incongruent in the modern society with their equivalents in contemporary societies. A conclusion was drawn that a lot of lessons can be learnt by modern societies from this traditional system of ECCE.

Conceptual Exemplification

The identified key concepts of this paper are explained thus:

Education

The concept, education has received considerable descriptions and definitions. According to Sign (2007:4) “the word, education is derived from a latin word, “Educatum” which means “to train”. He expatiated further that “E” means from inside and “Duco” means to draw out or to bring up. The duo combining together to mean to draw from within. Horgan, (2006:135) also defined education as “the transmission of knowledge by either formal or informal methods.

The key words common to these definitions of education are training and knowledge which can be formal or informal. When this training and knowledge are functional, they are purposeful and useful, hence the attainment of functional education.

Quoting Dewey, (1948), Aggarwal, (1995:487) stated that the concept, “value” means an “act of cherishing something and holding it dear.” Value education means inculcating in the children a sense of humanism, a deep concern for the well-being of others and the nation. (Venkataiah, 1997:2)

The word, knowledge which is the body of facts accumulated over time (Goddess and Grosset, 2009:185) has a strong link with skills when the acquired facts are put into use, culminating into proficiency and expertness.

When all the aforementioned concepts are achieved, they translate to national development. Development according to Rodney, (1972:1) implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self discipline, responsibility and material well-being”.

From the foregoing clarifications, it can be deduced that the theme of this discourse dwells on sound and useful training of individuals that leads to expertise in the knowledge acquired which eventually culminate into positive growth of the nation.

Early Childhood Care and Education

According to Chowdhury, (2002:1) “Educators refer to early childhood years as the pre-school age” The National Policy on Education (2004) sees early childhood education as “the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school.”

Wikipedia (2002) refers to early childhood education as “education before the age of normal schooling. *Advameg.inc* (2002) also viewed the concept as “activities and/or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children prior to their entry into elementary school.

From the foregoing definitions, early childhood education is seen by some school of thoughts as formal while by others as informal training for children before the normal school age with the latter conforming with the perception of ECCE by the focused society.

Early Childhood Education in Yoruba Culture

The Yoruba is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria who occupy the South-Western States of the country (Ogun, Lagos, Ondo, Oyo, Osun and Ekiti) mainly and some parts of Kwara and Kogi States in Northern Nigeria. Apart from Nigeria, the Yorubas are also found in sizeable numbers in the south-eastern parts of the Republic of Benin and Togo in West Africa (Balogun, 2009:1)

In the traditional Yoruba society whose ECCE is the thrust of this paper, early childhood education is conceptualized in the realm of traditional education as a whole which is informal and does not possess all the paraphernalia of the formal school system like school buildings, chalkboards, professional teachers and the like. The child’s mother, family members, kindred and neighbours constitute the teaching experts. (Fadipe, 1970:34).

Fafunwa, (1974:1) also described this informal education as the type of education (of which traditional childhood education belong) as an educational system prevalent in Africa (Yoruba society inclusive) before Christianity and Islam. The traditional Yoruba society views education as teaching and learning from childhood to adulthood employing care, love, lullaby, folktales, songs, proverbs, family names and panegyrics, and taboos as teaching strategies. Though the specific age limit for ECCE is not earmarked in the culture under reference, but for the purpose of this paper, ECCE in Yoruba culture shall be conceptualized as care and education given to children from conception to the age of six. This age of six is in cognizance with the primary school starting age as stated in the National Policy on Education, (2004:13)

In order to have a functional education for values, knowledge, skills, and national development, the foundational care and education in Yoruba culture considered relevant to the attainment of this objective are exemplified using age demarcation as delineation thus:

O Year to Birth

This period is accorded special attention by the Culture under reference. Right from the womb, the would-be mother takes precautions on what to eat and drink, what to wear, how to walk, sleep and the like. All for the sake of the baby.

The pregnancy is guided and nurtured by a qualified medicine – man whose role is analogous to the modern day doctor. This practice of medicine-men guiding and nurturing the foetus into healthy baby perfectly fit into ante natal clinic in contemporary societies whose importance to the baby and the mother cannot be over emphasized.

Laying credence to the imperative of pre-natal care, Yusuf, (1996:23) quoted Plato as emphasizing pre-natal care for the production of healthy babies. There is no gainsaying the fact that the foundation of preparing a child for functional education starts from the pre-natal care as any damage to the foetus affects the child and his/her educational pursuit.

At Birth to Toddler Years

The newly born baby is welcomed with love by having a befitting naming ceremony. Various names are given which are later combined with family's panegyric and employed as catalyst for success in the child's adult life.

The showering of love continues especially from the mother which includes among other forms of cares a spirited breast feeding. The traditional Yoruba woman breast feeds her child from birth to three years. (Awoniyi, 2009:3). This enviable long duration of breast feeding was apparently aided by the nature of women's occupation in those days which were self-employment.

The health benefits of breast feeding and the impediment of the contemporary mothers in actualizing it came to the fore recently in the House of Representatives when Hon. Jumoke Okoya Thomas (A.C.N., Lagos) sponsored a bill making exclusive breast feeding compulsory for women working in both public and private sectors. The sponsor of the bill also advocated for an avenue for nursing mothers to bring their babies to place of work for adequate breast feeding. (Daily Trust Newspaper, 30 January, 2013). Many Scholars are of the view that breast milk is the best for babies for proper growth.

According to Mark, (2003:58-59):

For babies, mother's breast milk offer the best and most complete food. Breast milk provides babies with antibodies which help to keep off the risk of illness ..., proper nutrition aids brain growth necessary for intellectual, cognitive, as well as psycho-motor development in the child.

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In the same vein, Richards, (1980:22) also stated that “breast milk is a very complicated mixture of fats, proteins, sugars, minerals and water that can provide all the food required by a baby for the first year or so of life”.

All these assertions on breast feeding depict the imperative of breast feeding in the foundation years of the child thereby, laying credence to the breast feeding habit of the society under focus which are worthy of emulation by contemporary society for eventual children’s functional education.

The Use of Lullaby

Also at this stage, a potent tool employed by the society under focus to care for a child and prepare him/her for bright future is a special sleeping song called *orin aremo* (lullaby). Yoruba lullaby is usually accompanied by the mother’s dance steps especially when the baby is strapped to her back. Isola, (1995:322) exemplified Yoruba lullaby thus: “The intellectual development of the child begins in the early months of life when it starts responding to the first contacts with adults through sound and movement packaged in accentuated rhythm ...”

Isola, (1995:322) expatiated further that:

The pipase fun rhythm in Yoruba called “mothers footwork” when the child is strapped to the mother’s back and the mother performs some special dance steps standing, has been discovered to be a great method of imparting the sense of movement to the child. When the child cries, lullabies are sung to make it stop or to make it sleep.

The importance of lullabies to children is also exemplified by Richards (1980:400) thus: “Rhythmical sounds as well as movements are soothing for infants. The lullaby is probably as old as human infancy. Most have a slow rhythm which is similar to the frequency with which cradles are rocked ...”

The importance of sleep to the health of infants cannot be over emphasized as buttressed by Sandrock, (2005:176) that “to develop healthily, infants not only need *sleep* but adequate nutrition. (Underlining, mine) Mussen, (1976) as quoted by Mallum, Haggan, and Ajaegbu (2002) also stated that: “Sleep is among the basic needs of infants”. From the foregoing assertions, the valuable therapic functions lullabies perform were brought to the fore.

Age Three to Six Years

At this stage, when the child can be verbally communicated with, the culture under focus focuses on moral instructions among other forms of care which is also considered as essential in preparing a child for functional education. For instance, a

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morally deficient student who indulges in drug addiction, cultism, prostitution and the like stands the risk of having his/her educational pursuit dampened as these acts may land him/her in jail or grave.

The tools employed for imparting moral instruction include folktales, rhymes, songs, taboos, family panegyrics and the like. Folktales are means of presenting didactic stories to children using play-way method. Songs and rhymes are also used to forewarn children against all sorts of immoral acts.

Family names and panegyrics also serve as valuable catalyst for morality and gallantry. The popularity of this method is revealed in a Yoruba proverb, *oruko omo ni ijanu omo* (A child's name cautions him/her).

The family panegyrics are in form of poetry which have the heroic achievements of the child's fore fathers as the content. The child's parent recites this poetry to the child's hearings especially in the morning when the child kneels down to greet the parent (If a female) or prostrates (if a male) for the parent, and constantly remind the child of the need to keep the flag of the family flying and not to bring the family's name into disrepute.

Conclusion

Attempts have been made in this paper to bring to the fore the ECCE in traditional Yoruba culture as a paradigm of foundation for the child's functional education. Modern societies have a lot to learn from this traditional system of education in order to have a solid foundation for functional education for values, knowledge, skills and national development.

Recommendations

On the basis of the conclusion above, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Like the traditional parents, the modern parents should take the issue of ante-natal and post natal care seriously to ensure a proper growth of the baby.
2. The modern parents should emulate the traditional parents' attitudes of love showering on the baby as enumerated in this paper. The impediments created by modernity should be minimized as much as possible.
3. Learning from the traditional parents, emphasis should be laid by the modern parents on the moral up-bringing of their children. A morally deficient child is a problem to himself and the society. The acquisition of functional education for such a child becomes a mirage.

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