

# IMPROVING PHYSICAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND CURRICULUM CHALLENGES OF THE YEAR 2020

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## **Abstract**

*High academic achievement is often determined by a congenial physical learning environment in schools, among other factors. This presentation focuses on how the physical learning environment in pre-primary and primary schools could be improved to enhance optimal learning during the instructional process. It also reviews some curriculum challenges likely to result from the improvement sought. The paper discusses what the present or actual physical learning environment at these levels of education is, against what it should be in order to facilitate effective and successful curriculum implementation as well as to maximize learning during instructional delivery. Recommendations to improve the physical learning environment of the schools and the curriculum challenges emanating from them were also made.*

Education has been described as the bedrock of development in every society. In this wise, therefore, there is the need for quality and comprehensive education in our school system, especially the pre-primary and primary levels, which undoubtedly are the foundation levels of education. In recognizing the roles played by children as the future of any nation and education as the most important vehicle of change, the pre-primary and primary schools, where these children spend most of their time for learning purpose, should have their physical learning environment improved upon so as to attain the achievement of curricula goals and objectives. The concept of education in modern times connotes formality, and formal education is highly institutionalized. This implies that institutions will have to be established for the purpose of education, and education shall be dispensed based on a well articulated curriculum. It is against this backdrop that the author of this paper shall discuss the improvement of physical learning environment in pre-primary and primary schools and curriculum challenges of the year 2020, under school infrastructural facilities such as the underlisted.

- ◆ Classroom blocks
- ◆ Classroom furniture
- ◆ Library / laboratory / Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities

- ◆ Toilet / water facilities
- ◆ Health facilities
- ◆ Field / play ground

The items listed above constitute the major physical learning environment of pre-primary and primary school pupils, and an exposition on each of them is necessary at this point in time.

**Classroom Blocks** The classroom is one important place in the operation of a school; it holds pupils together and offer them opportunity of achieving the purpose of education. Pupils bring into the classroom various traits arising from attitudes, social class, ethnicity, bias, idiosyncrasy, whims and caprices. All these require conscious manipulation to achieve instructional objectives (Robert-Okah, 2008).

Akubue (1991) states that the classroom plays very many prominent roles toward effective teaching and learning. Just like any other educational activity, teachers organize their work in the classroom. In the classroom, learning experiences are co-ordinated and various instructional efforts are made.

Due to the importance of teaching and learning there is need for the provision of adequate classroom spaces for the instructional process to thrive. Unfortunately, what can be found in Nigeria public pre-primary and primary schools is disappointing. In the public schools classroom blocks are grossly inadequate. In areas where they are available, the classrooms are not very habitable due to dilapidation, shattered doors and windows, blown off and caved- in roof tops. These conditions have resulted in the overcrowding of available classroom spaces, and the impact of this is well-known in terms of school enrolment, retention and completion. The above scenario makes children to become vulnerable in terms of safety and security. That is the environment such as infrastructure or personnel of the school setting, injuries during school activities, and violent issues within the school (FME/UNICEF/OAU, 2008).

The pre-primary and primary school classroom blocks are spatial facilities provided for formal teaching and learning. Therefore, they should be of standard sizes, spacious, well-ventilated, well-lit, have standard doors and windows with protectors and burglary proofs, and should have conventional floor finishing. Above all they should be spacious to the extent of having nature corner where pupils could interact with some natural materials, and a corners for storage of instructional materials.

**Classroom Furniture** Provision of classroom blocks is about the first step to providing comfort for both the teacher and pupils. Just like a living house, provision of furniture is the next step after the classroom blocks have been built, presently, because classroom blocks are lacking and inadequate where found, so are classroom furniture lacking and inadequate in public pre-primary and primary schools. For this reason, pupils are forced to sit on bare floors or crowd available desks and chairs. The

drawbacks associated with this situation are also well known. Prominent among them is discomfort on the side of pupils and teacher's inability to manage and control the class for effective teaching and learning.

Classroom furniture range from pupils' desks and chairs, teachers' tables, and chairs, shelves and cupboards, chalkboards, easels to wall boards. Provision of these classroom furniture is grossly inadequate, hence, apart from pupils and teachers sitting with little or no comfort in the classroom, the absence or inadequate supply of shelves and cupboards also poses a huge challenge to the security of pupils' books and other instructional materials found and utilized in the classroom. It is also noteworthy to mention that the chalkboard which is the basic material for the actual teaching and learning process within the classroom is inadequate and sometimes lacking in the schools, especially those located in the rural areas. All these have led to the unsuitable classroom environment which according to Esu, Enuokoha and Umoren (2004) are too difficult for the implementation of a well designed curriculum.

For curriculum implementation to be effective and instructional delivery successful, nursery and primary school classrooms desire a number of desks, tables and chairs to cater for the needs of all the pupils and their teachers in the classroom. Similarly, adequate and visible chalkboards, to aid the instructional process need to be provided, as well as shelves and cupboards to cater for the safety and security of pupils' and teachers' books and other instructional materials of the class.

**Library/Laboratory/ICT Facilities** The source of poor reading culture plaguing the entire system of education and the undue emphasis on theory to the detriment of practical skills acquisition can well be traced to the non-existence of library and laboratory facilities in public nursery and primary schools. From the layman's perspective, the library is where pupils / students go for individual reading, making reference to texts, to do their assignments and related projects. In all, these activities involve reading and reading habits that could make an individual to cultivate a good reading culture. Unfortunately, such library facilities are lacking. This implies that books of various kinds are equally not available; hence, pupils have little or nothing at their disposal to read.

A laboratory is the melting pot of all practical activities in the sciences. Findings during practical activities carried out in the laboratory during science lessons provoke students thinking processes and stimulate them to making more discoveries. However, these facilities are not available in the public pre-primary and primary institutions of learning, and this poses a challenge to both the pupils and their teachers. Libraries and laboratories are extended learning environments which constitute or contain a variety of instructional materials required to facilitate the teaching-learning process (Agabi, 2003), but sad enough Edeghere (2001) observed that state primary schools do not have libraries nor laboratories, in their places broken

bookshelves and very small nature corners are found within the classroom environment.

In the same vein, it is worthy to note that the world has become a global village via the instrumentality of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It is disappointing to observe that computers continue to remain a mirage in the public nursery and primary schools. These inform the reason behind increase in examination malpractice, low scientific and technological awareness and high computer illiteracy among Nigerian students up to the tertiary levels of education. If Nigeria is to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA), the seven point Agenda of the Federal Government and vision 20:20:20, it becomes incumbent upon government and major stakeholders in education to provide standard library and laboratory facilities as well as computers and other related hard and soft wares in the public schools. Provision of these shall certainly lay a solid foundation for good reading culture, acquisition of good scientific and technological skills and computer literacy.

**Toilet Facilities** These are very important in the life of a school and they appear to be most neglected. The importance lies in the fact that the facilities provide avenue for proper sanitary disposal of excreta and wastes. The health benefits derivable from the provision of adequate toilet facilities cannot be over emphasized. Provision of this facility is not common in public nursery and primary schools in terms of adequacy and gender sensitivity and appropriateness. FME/UNICEF/CUBE (2006) report that majority of primary school learners had no access to toilets, and where toilets are available the ratio of toilet to learners on the average was 1:120 (FME/UNICEF/OAU, 2008).

Sadly, FME/UNICEF/CUBE (2006) reported that only 32% of Nigerian primary schools have appropriate toilet facilities such as Water Closets (WCs). The environmental cleanliness of available toilets in the absence of adequate water supply also poses a challenge on the health of learners. Most public nursery and primary schools lack functional boreholes, while some of these schools depend on wells which not only failed to provide clean water but by virtue of their exposure to environmental hazards pose further threats with regards to diseases. This situation therefore, makes it difficult to promote healthy practices among learners, and to prevent water and sanitation related illness and diseases. Toilet and water facilities are very indispensable in the school system because they help to maximize the benefits from education. The need to provide these facilities in terms of adequacy, appropriateness and gender sensitivity, therefore, arises.

**Health Facilities** These are facilities that the school could use to aid the overall condition of a pupil or staff at a given time, the soundness of the body, freedom from disease or abnormality, and the condition of optimal wellbeing. The services of these facilities are preventive and curative, and the purpose is to help children at school to achieve maximum health to obtain the full benefit from education (FME, 2006). The

school health facilities include functional sick bay, first aid box with necessary equipment in them, school nurse and linkage with government-designated school clinics or health centres. Unfortunately, public pre-primary and primary schools operate without the above listed health facilities. The absence of health facilities in schools are likely to jeopardize the educational gains of pupils, since they have to be off and on in school due to slight or minor ill-health. Intensive effort should be made to provide functional health facilities in schools. This is because the facilities would help to stabilize the overall health condition of pupils, while at the same time preparing them to be physically and emotionally stable to get involved in the learning process.

**Field / Playground** Play according to Froebel is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling - an expression which the child's inner life requires. The value of play has made it expedient for it to be developed into a teaching method, called the 'play way method'. This teaching method is prescribed at the pre-primary level of education. For purposes of recreation and leisure, field and adequate play grounds should be provided. These activities go a long way in refreshing the body and mind for effective assimilation of concepts learnt in the teaching-learning process. It is unfortunate to observe that due to development; most public school compounds have been built upon, leaving the pupils with little or no space to play.

### **Implication for Curriculum Implementation**

Spacious and standard classrooms will enable teachers and children to re-arrange their desks and chairs in ways that will stimulate pupils' participation during the teaching-learning process. When children learn in well-lit and well-ventilated classrooms they concentrate more during instructional delivery with minimal discomfort. Classrooms whose doors and windows are protected not only secure the inhabitants, but also provide safety and security for the instructional materials in that class. Adequate desks and chairs guarantee some measure of comfort and preparedness for pupils during instructional delivery. This is because they do not need to sit on bare floors nor crowd themselves on the chairs. A good chalkboard is a medium of communication in the classroom.

Most of the teacher's verbalism is transcribed on the chalkboard in form of chalkboard summary which pupils copy into their notebooks. Shelves form a good podium for textbooks, workbooks and notebooks to be displayed; hence, books could be traced and sorted more easily while in the shelves. A good table and chair also make the teachers' daily routine more convenient. Use of library and laboratory facilities not only contribute optimally to pupils' academic achievement, but also lay a solid foundation for a good reading culture and acquisition of scientific and technological skills. Pupils' exposure to these facilities also makes teachers' duties easy in the classroom.

Provision of adequate, child friendly and gender appropriate toilet facilities and water will save children the trauma of contracting preventable diseases in the school. The knowledge and skills acquired from proper handling of toilet facilities could be applied in the homes thereby bringing about a generation of children free from preventable diseases such as diarrhea and cholera. Knowledge about and provision of health facilities could breed a generation of healthy children through fitness exercises, education about nutrition, diet, immunization services, first aid kits, sick bays and school clinics. Adequate play grounds and fields could also provide means for recreational activities to meet a state of equilibrium in the pupils' body, mind and soul.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has treated ways of ensuring quality in education at the pre-primary and primary levels through improvement of the physical learning environment of these schools. The areas covered included infrastructural facilities such as classroom blocks, classroom furniture, library, laboratory and ICT facilities, toilet / water facilities, health facilities and field and play grounds. The implication of all these for curriculum implementation was reviewed. It is hoped that if the following recommendations are adopted, pre-primary and primary schools physical learning environment will be greatly improved for quality education.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the importance of the physical learning environment of the pre-primary and primary school pupils, the following recommendations are made:

1. Government, private proprietors and other stakeholders should endeavour to provide spacious, well-ventilated, well-lit classrooms whose doors and windows are well secured.
2. Classroom furniture such as desks, tables and chairs that are child appropriate and to teacher's specification should be adequately provided for pre-primary and primary schools. Additionally, cupboards and shelves should be provided for security and display of instructional materials. This is a responsibility for all stakeholders in education.
3. Library and laboratory facilities such as reading tables and chairs, a variety of books and service equipment should also be adequately provided for nursery and primary schools by government and major stakeholders in the provision of basic education.
4. Computers – Personal Computers (PCs) and laptops should be provided for teachers and pupils in nursery and primary schools to make them conversant with Information Communication Technology (ICT).
5. Toilet and water facilities such as water closets, wash hand sinks or basins, soap, hand towels and boreholes or wells should be provided alongside classroom blocks. However, these must be child friendly, gender appropriate and adequate. Besides, the school should evolve a way of making the water safe for drinking.

6. Health facilities such as functional sick bays, first aid kits with equipment and school clinics or linkage with government health centers should be established and provided by government.
7. Fields and open spaces should not be encroached upon during the building of more houses in the school compound.
8. The School Based Management Committees (SBMCs) should evolve a one pupil-to-one desk approach. By this approach pupils and their parents would be responsible for the maintenance of the seats and desks allocated to their children/ward respectively.

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