

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is doubtful whether we can really provide for the wholesome development of our people, if we are not clear as to what constitutes an educational experience. Misleading concepts are bound to misdirect our energies and resources into practices that yield minimal fruits and sustain wholly uneducated responses. One is constrained to say that most of our daily habits are reflections of our failure to properly educate the masses. This, amongst others, makes the assessment of Pre-primary education system in Nigeria an inevitable task, as it constitutes the bedrock of the development of the self activity of each individual person. This paper therefore-, examines the challenges and prospects of pre-primary education in Nigeria and proffers some solutions for its proper implementation.

Introduction

Pre-primary education is referred to the education given to children aged three to five years prior to their entering primary school. This type of education is currently being provided for, mainly in privately owned institutions. Day care centres also exist for children below age two. Pre-primary schools are mainly concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas where there are working mothers who have no relations or house-helpers to take care of their children.

Concept of Pre-Primary Education

Rally childhood education regards education in the early stages of childhood, as the -most vulnerable stage in a person's life. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), it spans the-human life from birth to age eight. Infants and toddlers experience life more holistically than any other age group. Social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic and physical lessons are not learned separately by very young children. Adults, who are most helpful to young children, interact in ways that help us (o understand that the child learns from the whole experience, not just that part of the experience to which the adult gives attention. This is why early childhood education often focus on children learning through play.

The term, "early childhood education," is often used to describe pre-school or baby/child care programmes. Researchers in the field as well as early childhood educators, view parents and/or families as an integral part of the early childhood education process. Early childhood education take many forms, depending on the theoretical and educational beliefs of the educator or parent.

Other terms which are often used interchangeably with early childhood education are "early childhood learning," "early care," "nursery education" and "early education". Psychologists and medical experts have since established that much of the first two years of life are spent in the creation of a child's first "sense of self or the building of a first identity. This is a crucial part of children's make-up: how they first see themselves; how they think they should function; how they expect others to function in relation to them, etc. For this reason, early care must ensure that in addition to employing carefully selected and trained caretakers, programme policy must also emphasize links with family, home culture, and home" language. Care Centres should support children's families rather than be a substitute for them.

Modern societies show serious concern for the education of their young ones for obvious reasons, it is a common practice in most societies to make provision for early-.childhood or preschool education programmes of various sorts for children below the official school-going age (which is usually six years), mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools.

Types of Pre-Primary Institutions

There are various types of pre-primary institutions in Nigeria, the difference is found in their mode of operations. Families may seek out the early childhood education they need or community may decide to provide the services and make them available to families. The forms are as follows;

Child Care Centres: These are centres that provide supplemental care for children from infancy through kindergarten ages, during the typical working hours of parents. In some localities, they are open for operation between the hours of 7:00 am to 12:00 noon or beyond, depending *on* the needs of *the* parents and the school administration.

Childcare centres are organized by profit and non-profit making groups. Most of them charge parents tuition fee, for sending their wards to the centre, even if they have some form of subsidy from one governmental agency, church or the like. In Nigeria, most of these centres are profit making in nature. They are regulated by an agency of the government in most advanced countries, but here in Nigeria, the system is different as the regulation of such centres is not well organized and coordinated.

Church Sponsored Centres: Churches are prime centres for both early childhood, primary education and in recent times, for other levels of education programmes in Nigeria. Church leaders are motivated by a desire to provide a needed public service to make money to help pay for a church/school building, or as a way of attracting members to the faith. Some schools located in church premises are completely secular in nature, while others teach various aspects of the church's religion. Generally though, they must conform to state licensing standards when providing such early childhood education services.

Employer Sponsored Child Care Centres: This form of childcare institution was pioneered in the United States of America during the World War II, in which mothers were needed to work in Defense Plants. The system as of today is currently undergoing a reform; child care is now being provided on worksite for employees' children or an allowance may be provided them as part of the employees' benefit package for purposes of selecting their choice child care institution. Employer-sponsored child care centres now abound in major cities and towns in Nigeria and they provide such services both during work and recreational hours.

Family Day-Care Home; This kind of service is mostly organized by mothers and family members who are professionals and graduates, but wish to apply their professional skills, while staying with the children at home. Sometimes also, spinsters may engage in the running of such family day care institutions. Such homes are regulated by the local or state agency.

Drop-in-Child-care Centres: These centres cater for young children on an hourly basis, usually for an hourly fee; according to the number they are allowed to accept. Drop-in centres are also located in places such as shopping centres or amusement parks. Some drop-in centres are organized around a child abuse therapy group to serve parents who may be inclined to abusing their children. In some parts of the world, particularly in industrialized societies, parents drop off their children at such centres, whenever they feel the stress and strain of child care. Teachers at such centres, play very important role, as part of the support team of the Mental Health Agency, helping to rehabilitate the abusive parents. As a result, such teachers require specialized training, which must include experience and ability to make children feel secure, comfortable and happy because children act like typical strangers with here-and-now needs.

Nigeria, being one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, needs to encourage this form of institution to help take care of the numerous adjustment problems which currently abound in the society.

Nursery Schools: The Nursery School is also called the Pre-kindergarten school centre or the Child Development Centre. Nursery Schools are generally adjudged more educational than Childcare Centres, in times past. But recent developments in the educational sector, especially at the pre-primary aspect, is gradually being eliminated as increased attention is now also being given to Child care Centres.

Parent-Cooperative Schools: This type of pre-primary educational service is typically organized by groups of middle-class families in order to provide high-quality early childhood educational experience for their children at an affordable rate. Parents in a cooperative, contribute to keep up their facilities and to continue operating the school programme. One highly valued component of the parent-cooperative school is the close link parents feel about their children's education and their teachers too. Parents learn a great deal about children by helping in their children's group. Parent-Cooperative groups are popular today in America among families where their mothers do not hold full-time job.

Stages in Child Development

The concept of Pre-primary education is very important because of the high level of vulnerability of the age bracket involved. Children have different developmental domains, which are

all related to one another. These include:

- a) Motor Control - Concerning children's ability to use and control their muscles.
- b) Perception and Sensory Development - How children function using the senses and their ability to process the information gained.
- c) Communication and Language Development - Using visual and sound stimuli, especially in the acquisition of language, as well as in the exchange of thoughts and feelings.
- d) Cognitive Development - Concerning how children think and react.

Early childhood education is considered by many to be beneficial to young children for their educational development from school-entry age. This, among other reasons account for the official recognition of Pre-primary education by (he Federal Government of Nigeria, vide the National Policy on Education. In. the policy document, provision is made for a policy on pre-primary education stating its objectives and measures to be taken by government to facilitate (he achievement of the policy-objectives. It also allows for private participation in the provision of pre-primary education.

It should be noted however, that not a ll arc agreed on the need for or effectiveness of such; early childhood education programme for subsequent educational development of children. Some early writers on this issue hold (he view that young children are not mature enough to learn complex skills demanded by pre-school educational programmes and that the warmth of mother, love and the fostering of children's emotional security are more important than any form of educational programme (Robinson & Robinson, 1968).

Some contend that early childhood years should be utilized in firmly grounding the child in his/her sub-culture and that exposing him/her to pre-school programmes which emphasize intellectual skills would impose middle class values on the child and destroy the positive aspects of his/her sub-culture (Reissmjsn, 1962). Furthermore, some leading scholars in early childhood education have doubted the wisdom in exposing young children very early to formal education, expressing the fear that the short -term academic gains would be offset by the long-term-stifling of (heir motivation and self- initiated learning (Weikart, 2000 & Zieghlcr, 1987).

In the same vein, Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn (1995) cautioned that earl) academic gains in reading skills associated with formal instruction of preschoolers could have long -lonn negative effects on their achievement.

Robinson and Robinson (1968), have persuasively argued, however, that beginning early to educate children should not pose any danger, as it is difficult to see how pleasant experiences, stimulating within reasonable limits and logically sequenced, can be harmful to mental health or to cognitive development. Moreover, some research evidences indicate that early Childhood education have positive influences on children's affective, conceptual and social development in subsequent years.

Aims and Objectives Of Pre-Primary Education

In the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998) early childhood education is labeled as pre-primary education and is defined as the education given in an educational institution to children aged three to five years plus, prior to their entering the primary school.

According to the policy document, the purpose of pre-primary education includes among others:

- ❖ Providing a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- ❖ Preparing the child for the primary level of education;
- ❖ Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work,
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes forms, etc. through play, and
- ❖ Inculcating social norms.

Policy Implementation

The official recognition given to pre-primary education in the National Policy on Education (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1977) combined with a number of factors to give rise to an unprecedented expansion in the provision of child care and pre-primary education or nursery schools in the country. Almost all the pre-primary institutions in the country are owned by private proprietors. Some of these establishments go by the name day care centres' or 'playgroups'¹ etc., and take care of the

children while their parents are at work or go for other engagements. But most of them are nursery schools for providing early childhood education. In some instances, a group of parents hire and pay a teacher to take care of their pre-school age children and teach them rudiments of numbers and alphabets. This practice which has almost faded away mainly for economic reasons, started from the early eighties and for the fear by some parents that their children would come in contact with some diseases in the Day care centres or nursery schools; many of which were sub-standard. Variations in provision, make the registration of these institutions somehow difficult for the Ministry of Education officials to control.

Very few of the above establishments operate as child-care or child-minding units only; others operate as both child-care units and nursery schools. What is in vogue now, is for these establishments to operate as nursery schools for two years or a bit more and subsequently apply for license to operate as both nursery and primary schools. Most of them accept children aged two into their nursery sections who later transit to the primary sections of the same establishments at the age of five or even less.

The number of children in these institutions varies widely from one or two in the newly established ones to over 300 in the older ones. However, owing to the high demand for pre-primary education by parents, it does not take so much time for newly established pre-primary institutions to grow and develop.

Recent Trends in Pre-Primary Education

Nowadays nursery schools are located in various places and buildings - campuses of some universities and colleges, premises of some industrial and business organizations, church premises, residential buildings some part or the whole of which are hired for use as nursery schools only or both nursery and primary schools, and so on, while some are set up mainly in some towns as full-fledged nursery and primary schools with their own building and premises. The physical structures vary widely in terms of quality and aesthetics from one establishment to another, so do the facilities and equipment.

With the possible exception of the few nursery schools established by some universities, colleges of education, companies and a few rich individuals, teacher quality is generally low. It is only a few of the nursery schools, especially those owned by educational institutions, private companies and wealthy individuals that can afford to engage the services of university graduate teachers and the holders of Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE) qualifications. Most others employ a few N.C.E. teachers (if any at all), who are usually underpaid, while others employ mainly Grade Two teachers and secondary school leavers with the School Certificate or General Certificate. Ordinary level) qualifications. The nursery schools that engage (i.e. services of qualified teachers, especially those owned by private individuals, usually charge high fees while those that charge relatively low fees, usually employ unqualified teachers. Employing unqualified teachers who receive low pay is a strategy used by many proprietors to make their services affordable to a great majority of parents and at the same time maintain a satisfactory profit margin.

Although the National Policy on Education prescribes that the child in the pre-primary institution should be involved in active learning, the document detailing guidelines on provision and management of pre-primary education is silent on the curriculum contents of such an institution (Federal Ministry of Education, 1987). In the absence of such guidelines and copies of the curriculum for pre-primary education, proprietors and teachers resort to curricula of their choice.

The curriculum of a typical nursery school owned by most private individuals includes: alphabets, numbers, nursery rhymes, colouring and story time and, in some cases, rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. The emphasis of most is on the intellectual development of the children. Much more time is devoted to the learning of alphabets and memorization of facts, information, poems and some short passages from various books in English language than to recreational and social activities. This is because the yardstick for assessing the quality in-effectiveness of nursery schools by parents seems to be the age at which the children attending them are able to count, recognize the alphabet, read and in particular, recite memorized information, poems, verses and passages. The younger the age at which children attending a particular school can do these, the higher the quality of the school is adjudged to be by members of the public, and the more patronage it is likely to receive from parents if the fees charged are not excessive.

In an attempt to show how effective their nursery schools are, the proprietors of some combined nursery and primary schools admit children at the age of two and allow them to transit to the primary section of such schools at the age of five or even four, both of which are below the official school-going age. This transition to primary education below the official entry age, often

receives a nod from those parents who wish to show how fast their children can progress through the educational system, and how intelligent they are.

Challenges of Pre-Primary Education in Nigeria

In a situation where almost all the provisions for early childhood or pre-primary education are rendered by private individuals and groups for mainly commercial purposes, there are bound to be some shortcomings in the implementation of the policy on nursery education and problems in the realization of the objectives of such a policy.

Much of the shortcomings in the implementation of the National Policy on Pre-primary education hinges on the failure of the Federal Government to put into effect most of the measures it has stated in the National Policy on Education aimed at ensuring that the policy objectives are achieved.

Of all the measures the Federal Government undertook in order to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria, the only one it effectively accomplished, is the granting of permission for private effort in the provision of pre-primary education in the country, with virtually no participation by the public sector.

The lack of supervision to ensure maintenance of standards, has led to increase in the number of both pre-primary and primary educational institutions in the country. Significant provision is yet to be made in any public or private teacher training institution in the country for the production of specialist teachers in early childhood education. Even if any institution runs a programme for producing such teachers, it is doubtful if it can attract many clients, as neither the federal nor any state government has established any nursery or pre-primary schools, where graduates of such programmes can be employed. Work in private nursery or pre-primary institutions would probably have no attraction for specialist pre-primary teachers because of low wages and job insecurity associated with teaching in such institutions.

No government (state or federal) in the country has done anything to ensure that mother-tongue or local language is mainly used for instruction in nursery schools as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998). Enforcing the use of mother-tongue in schools will even run counter to the interests of parents of the children in such school 11 lost of whom are anxious for their children to acquire the official language (which is English) as early as possible.

Until recently, the provision of pre-primary education was the sole preserve of private proprietors who had to provide their services in line with the values and priorities of parents in order to remain in business. As far as the use of mother tongue for instruction is concerned, the values of parents seem to be in conflict with those of the policy makers who prescribed that the medium of instruction in such institutions and lower classes of primary schools should be principally the child's mother tongue or the language of the local community. Contrary to this, almost all parents, especially of the middle and high classes that patronize pre-primary institutions, wish their children to be taught in English language as early as possible because of the advantages that knowledge of the language convey on such children in the primary and subsequent levels of the Nigerian educational system. The ease with which children require and speak English language is one of the most important criteria parents use to assess the quality of pre-primary institutions in the country.

The Play method of teaching that is advocated in the National Policy on Pre-primary Education is not effectively used in most of the schools, as most of the teachers are not trained on its use. Proprietors and teachers provide the children with toys to play with mainly for recreational purposes and not for instruction. Very few, if any, nursery school teachers in the country, have received formal training in the use of the play method or any other type of learning activity to inculcate social norms in pre-school children as advocated in the policy document. State Ministry of Education officials are, in principle, supposed to visit and inspect the physical plant, the human and other resources available in a proposed nursery school and if these are found to be adequate, the Ministry would approve the school for operation. In most cases these visits are made a long time after the school had become operational and has been paying the prescribed taxes whether or not the infrastructure is adequate. Under such circumstances and with lobbying by the proprietors of such schools who often form powerful pressure groups, the ministry officials find it difficult not to recommend such schools for approval. This explains why nursery and primary schools can be found in any type of location, making use of all types of unimaginable facilities,

These shortcomings and some other factors have given rise to some problems which are now manifesting in different aspects of education. One of these is the wide variation in infrastructure and facilities ranging from good to very poor with a preponderance of poor ones. The same is true with regard to teachers in nursery or pre-primary schools. Some of the people employed to teach the children are neither trained to teach nor know how to handle or relate with children. Moreover, as there is no standard curriculum to guide the activities of these teachers, such people might make the children lose interest in education as they would not be able to present learning experiences to the children in the stimulating and logical manner prescribed by Robinson and Robinson (1968).

The practice by some proprietors of admitting young children at age five or even four, into the primary sections of their schools, one or two years before the official school entry age, is fast becoming the norm in almost all the institutions that run both the pre-primary and primary school programmes. This is contrary to the National Policy on Education and may later have some negative effects on those of them who were not ready for primary education before being admitted into primary schools. Most of these problems hinge on the inability of both the State and Federal governments to exercise effective control on the establishment and running of pre-primary schools in the country. In fact, the number of registered pre-primary schools in some states is so large that even if the supervisors or inspectors of education are very enthusiastic to play their roles in this regard, they will be overwhelmed by the amount of work involved.

Lack of adequate number of inspectors to regulate the establishment of, and to monitor the activities in these nursery schools, the locations of some of which are not known to inspectors, is a real problem. Another related problem is how to detect and close down unregistered ones that spring up here and there in almost equally large numbers. It should be noted, however, that the expansion in pre-school education facilities occurs mainly in urban and semi-urban areas of the country.

Recommendations on the Way Forward

For pre-school age children in the country to benefit from the lofty objectives of pre-primary education policy, there is the need for the Federal, State and Local Governments to ensure that relevant facilities are available in both rural and urban areas. The afore-mentioned initiative on early childcare undertaken by the UNICEF holds good promise for narrowing the gap in pre-primary education provision between rural and urban areas if vigorously pursued.

Various local governments in the country should conic to the aid of rural areas in terms of the provision of pre-primary education facilities. Matching grants or any other type of grants could be given to communities to set up such institutions if the government cannot do it all. Such communities can then run same at reduced costs to parents. A more spatial distribution of pre-primary school facilities can be effected by devolving responsibility for (hat level of education on local governments. Whether or not local governments are given such roles, there is still the need for Federal or State governments to set up and run few model pre-primary institutions to serve as guide to proprietors who are interested in establishing theirs. There is the need .for officials of stale ministries of education to enforce the regulations laid down by (he Federal Ministry of Education with regard to the provision of pre-primary education. Effective qualify monitoring units should be set up by state Ministries of Education and provided with necessary logistic support to ensure that minimum standards are maintained in both public and private pre-primary institutions. Preschool educational institutions that do not meet the minimum standards specified by any stale's Ministry of education should he closed down, to be reopened only when the provider complies with laid down standards.

The Federal Government should take positive steps so that programmes for producing teachers who specialize in early childhood education do not only exist in some of the nation's teacher education institutions, but are entered into by teacher education candidates. This can be achieved by offering various incentives to such teacher education candidates.

In addition, each state of the federation should add on nursery sections in some of their primary schools where (he products of such programmes can find employment.

Conclusion

Early childhood education from available evidence has a positive influence on the socio-educational development of children in later life even as some writers have asserted that investing in it also can yield high returns (Barnell, 2006). However, it is not any type of educational experience offered anywhere by any kind of teacher, that can have such an effect on children. The objectives of pre-primary education in the country can only be achieved if the policy is consistently and effectively implemented. For this to happen, government, especially at the local level, should show more interest in

early childhood education by providing some of (he facilities and funds and must make sure that all those measures stated in the policy document aimed at facilitating the achievement of the objectives are put in place.

If these recommendations are religiously followed, the future of pre-primary education in Nigeria would be truly guaranteed. More effective control should be exercised over the establishment of nursery schools. Approvals should be given to building plans of nursery schools before construction work starts in order to standardize some of the infrastructural facilities. These facilities should be inspected and declared adequate before the admission of the first batch of children. Effective measures should be taken to ensure that such facilities are available to children in rural areas. Very importantly, the facilities and activities in these schools should be closely monitored and regularly inspected to enhance the quality of their educational programmes.

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