

## RE-POSITIONING NURSERY EDUCATION FOR EFFECTIVENESS IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### **Abstract**

The overall objective of early childhood/pre-primary education is to foster effective development of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of the child and to foster self-reliance, effective integration in the school community and the society. The paper examines the major contribution of pre-primary education as a basis for sound educational background; consider the national policy as it affects pre-primary education. Attempts are made in the paper to marry the stated objectives, government undertakings as specified in the policy document with what is happening in the schools. The author's verdict is that this level of education receives from Government only lip service. Recommendations for improving the situation are made.

### **Introduction**

“Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution, it represents the wise choice out of many alternatives” (Foster, 2008).

The development of socio-economical structure of a country depends on its education system. The academic level of citizens plays an important role in strengthening the social, economical and technological fabric of a nation. Pre-primary education is a major contributor in the overall progress of any country because it lays a solid foundation for other levels of education to build on.

### **Pre-primary (Nursery) Education**

The National Policy on Education (2004, p.6) defines, Pre-primary education

as the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten.

The document went further to itemize the purpose of pre-primary education as:

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 for the children while their parents are at work (farms, markets, offices).
4. Inculcate social norms
5. Inculcate in children the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, local

environment, playing with toys etc;

6. Teaching cooperation and team spirit.
7. Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes and forms.
8. Teaching good habits especially good health habits.

In order to achieve the above objectives, government stated its intentions to:

- Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary (Nursery) Education
- Make provision in Teacher Training Institutions for student teachers who want to specialize in pre-primary education.
- Ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community; develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages; produce text books in Nigeria languages.
- Ensure that play will be the main method of teaching and teachers are trained on this basis.
- Regulate and control the preparation of pre-primary education as well as ensure that the staff of pre-primary education institution is adequately trained and that essential equipment is provided. (NPE, 2004 p.6)

The National Policy statement also reveals the government intention to review and enforce the educational laws which

relate to the establishment of Nursery schools to make sure that schools that are opened are well run and that pre-primary teachers are qualified and other academic infrastructure provided. The government also promised that the Ministry of Education would make regular inspections in order to ensure maintenance of high standards.

### **Status of Early Childhood Education**

Utulu (2005) stated that the status of early childhood education is determined by the national philosophy, early childhood provisions, cultural environment and the level of awareness of the society. There are many kinds of Child Care programmes to choose from, but only the parent himself/herself can determine the one that best meets his/her needs and those of the child. When visiting various day care centres it may be helpful to keep some of the following questions in mind:

#### **1. Child- Teacher Interactions**

- How many children is one staff member expected to care for?
- How many of the staff are qualified in early childhood education?
- Are staff actively involved with the children? (listening, playing, initiating)
- Do they display warmth and patience?
- Do the children appear happy, content and well attended to?

- Does the programme meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education?

- Are electrical outlets overloaded?
- Are unused outlets capped?
- Are medicines, cleaning products locked up?

## 2. Physical Environment

- ✓ Is the physical environment comfortable and pleasing to look at?
- ✓ Do they have a wide variety of age-appropriate play materials on low accessible shelving?
- ✓ Is there plenty of open space for free movement of the children?
- ✓ Are there separate areas for arts and crafts, dramatic play, general play, eating and sleeping?
- ✓ Is there a weekly or monthly schedule of activities pasted on the main bulletin board?

It is necessary to take time to visit selected institutions with the child. The visits will help parents to arrive at decisions that both the child and parent will be satisfied with.

## The Value of Pre-School Education

Watson (1999) stated that most families have known all along that young children birth to five are “learning machines”. These are the years that lay the foundation of language and intellectual success, and are equally foundational for emotional, moral and social growth. Addressing the critical years of young children is core for both the children whose life opportunities are at stake and for a society whose goals demand that children be prepared to begin school, achieve academic success, and ultimately sustain economic independence and engage constructively with others as adult citizens.

According to Bloom (1994) intellectual intelligence measured at 17 years, about 50% of the development takes place between conception and the age of 4. About 30% matured intelligence had been developed between 4 and 8 years and between 8-17 years, 20% is developed.

The period 3-5 years has been so important that it has general favourable comments (reports) from modern authors like Agusiobo (1997) and Utulu (2005). These authors in their publications itemized some objectives for pre-primary

## 3. Nutrition/Health and Safety Standards

- Do they serve nutritious meals and snacks?
- Is there a weekly menu pasted?
- How do they care for sick children, or respond to emergencies?
- Do they ensure proper supervision of the children at all times?
- Is the centre a safe place generally?
- Is the outside play area securely fenced?
- Is the yard free of broken glass or other potential hazards?
- Is the outside play equipment well-built?
- Is there a plan in case of fire outbreak?

education and stressed the importance of pre-primary education. The Plowden 1967 report of the central advisory committee in England confirmed that the loss made at the early stage of education might be missed forever.

Freud (1960) also supported the call for pre-school education. If we assume for the time being, that the findings of Bloom (1994), More (1996) and others have universal validity, then the implications are straight forward. We must then pay more attention to the early years than we have hither done.

More (1996) contended that the early years of life are the most creative and intellectually productive. Montessori (1999) also affirmed that 2-6 years is the most critical period for the child development. According to her the child's growth is spontaneous during the period. He has a lot of energy and asks a lot of questions. Reagent and Bruner (1996) also emphasized the period as critically important for a child's development at the pre-school age.

Most parents particularly those who are illiterate tend to consider 3-6 years education as encouraging children to be inquisitive. Many parents even regard such inquisitiveness as bad manners and at times punish these children. To make the situations worse, many houses lack books, magazines, audio-visual aids etc. which create stimulating environment for the children. The effect of the absence of all these facilities could be serious when we consider the suggestion of Bloom that deprivation in early years can have far

greater consequences than later years deprivation.

### **Guidelines for Nursery School Curriculum**

Maduewesi (2003) stated that an important objective of nursery or pre-primary education is building a smooth transition from the home to the school. This was interpreted by professional child educators to mean equipping the three to five old year child with appropriate skills such that on getting into the primary school, he/she will be at ease, confident and well equipped to handle the social and intellectual learnings that are called for. It was on these bases that the National Curriculum Guidelines for Nursery Schools were prepared and produced for the Nigerian Nursery School market in 1988. The Curriculum Guidelines were prepared based on a careful study, analysis and interpretation of the stated objectives of pre-primary education and in conjunction with the syllabus of the first year of primary school. This was how the building of the transition bridge between the home and the school as stated in the NPE and reflected in the Curriculum Guidelines was developed.

Unfortunately for reasons that are not unconnected with instability in government policies, with having inexperienced and uniformed persons taking charge of policy and implementation issues, in the Federal Ministry of Education, the National Curriculum Guidelines have not been given top priority it deserved and was not replaced. There is thus a gap.

### **Caregiver Curriculum**

As of now the Federal Ministry of Education in conjunction with UNICEF is engaged in a pilot project called Early Child Development and Education Programme (ECCDE) involving a few states. A number of publications have been produced for use by child caregivers in the selected states for the project. The project, it is stated officially, is targeted at the young Nigerian Children from 0-6 years in rural and urban lower socioeconomic strata (Agusiobo 1997)

A caregiver's curriculum has been prepared and published. It is commendable that such a grassroots curriculum is being proposed. However while the pilot project is going on, the years are passing and the hundreds of nursery school proprietors have nothing to guide their activities. Additionally, the proposed ECCDE Curriculum is actually a general provision being prepared for child caregivers covering the care of babies from birth to six years. The nursery or pre-nursery school on the other hand is clearly documented in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) as a school for 3 to 5 year olds to prepare them among other things for entry into primary school. Thus apart from the National Curriculum Guidelines which has been given top priority and unavailable for purchase, there is actually nothing to guide nursery school proprietors and their teachers to prepare their curriculum. Surveys conducted by Maduewesi each year since 1990 confirm that the majority of nursery schools improvise their curriculum as best they

can, by copying from others, making up their own, borrowing from primary schools or even importing from abroad.

It is therefore not uncommon to find many nursery schools teach academic materials and skills which properly belong to the primary schools. They teach number recitation and number writing, they teach addition and subtraction, even recitation of multiplication tables. In language, they teach English rhymes and letter names together with writing of letters and words. In general, Nursery schools dance to the tunes played by parents. In the absence of clear leadership or guidance from the Federal Ministry of Education, such is the pitiable situation in the nursery schools.

### **Improvement Needs of Pre-primary Education for the Nigerian Child.**

Government policy regarding pre-primary education is clear from the National Policy on Education (NPE) document. But what is operating in the field is different.

Maduewesi (2003) recommended the following measures to address the ugly trend.

1. The private sector, which operates nursery is not being guided through provision of Curriculum Guidelines, or appropriate supervision and inspection. Government and or its agencies have not provided a market from which they could recruit competent teachers. These short-comings require improvement.

2. Before nursery education can be qualitative or effective, certain safeguards have to be put in place. Standards and regulations, which are already in existence, must be enforced e.g. regarding specifications for school building, school sites, class size, teacher qualification etc. New requisite regulation such as what and how to teach have to be made.
3. The ambivalence surrounding the grass roots ECCDE and Nursery Schools should be resolved. The truth is that both can co-exist. The Nursery Schools are already entrenched in the National Policy on Education document and they serve a distinct and identified clientele. The National Curriculum Guidelines were produced by government in respect of Nursery schools. The documents should be reprinted, revised and if need be updated. Copies should be made available for purchase to serve the clientele. The ECCDE Curriculum, on the other hand, which is for general care givers and not for professional teachers of young children, should also be made available for all and sundry to assist to cater for babies, toddlers and older children who cannot attend regular nursery schools. Government has a duty to remove the confusion surrounding these two programmes and then provide adequately for their use to serve the children of Nigeria.
4. Materials and publications-workshops should be mounted or organised to acquaint the teachers on the proper use of curriculum guides or reading materials.
5. Institutions and organizations, particularly non-governmental ones, which are qualified or show competence in teaching the 3-5 year olds such as World Organisations for Early Child Education, should be assisted by government to mount or run long and short courses to improve the skills of nursery school teachers.

### **Conclusion**

Policy documents and statements on nursery education in Nigeria are generally adequate and well thought out. Implementation has been extremely poor and unsatisfactory. Out of more than fifteen undertakings of government for achievement of nursery school objectives, probably only one allow private enterprises involvement in providing nursery education has been fully implemented. There is little evidence of sustained government interest or concern in the welfare of nursery schools by guiding them through curriculum guidelines, through regular supervision, inspection and enforcement of existing regulations. The recently conceived Early Child Care Development and Education Project (ECCDE) which UNICEF is funding has captured and diverted the

interest of the Federal Ministry of Education from pre-primary or nursery education which is clearly entrenched in the National Policy on Education. Much as ECCDE has place in providing general information to guide the general care giver, nursery education has a clientele that deserves as much attention.

We therefore call on the Federal Ministry of Education and or its agencies to show interest in pre-primary education, to guide the private sector, which is engaged in this enterprise so that the objective of providing a smooth transition for our young children from home to school may be achieved.

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