

EDUCATION:

A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE

A book of readings in honour of

**Professor
EMMANUEL ADEREMI AKINADE**



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Integrated Early Childhood Development: A Challenge for Reforms in Pre-Primary Education Programme in Nigeria

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Abstract

The idea of educating pre-school aged children has been in existence for thousands of years in some countries, while in others, it is relatively new. Pre-primary education has also gained ground in Nigeria since its inclusion in the National Policy on Education (1981, revised 2004) because of its importance. However, government's neglect of children aged 0-3 in the NPE and the uncontrolled private efforts in the provision of pre-primary institutions have made this level of education vulnerable to substandard. This paper has identified some of the lapses in the pre-primary education system particularly the erroneous conception that pre-primary education means early childhood schooling rather than the extent to which pre-primary education school experiences enable them to become enquirers, explorers, investigators and learners. Suggestions on how to make the pre-primary education programme conform to early childhood care and education practices were made.

Key words: Pre-primary education, Policy provision, pre-school practices, child development

Introduction

The demand for one form of pre-primary education or another has increased tremendously in Nigeria within the last few decades. The increase stems from the people's genuine desire for good education for their children which would help them take the rightful places in fast changing world. Similarly, the increasing awareness of the people and the stakeholders of pre-primary education on the tremendous opportunities which pre-primary education generally bestows on its products socially, morally, mentally, physically, emotionally may have influenced the high demand for it.

Therefore, in order to meet the growing desire of the people for education of their children the Federal Government introduced pre-primary education in the National Policy on education (2004 revised) and affirmed that it will encourage private effort in the provision of pre-school education to compliment the services of the established pre-primary sections in the existing public primary schools. Since its introduction, one form of pre-primary education or another has developed in Nigeria (Oguntosi, 1993; Amosun, 2000). However, in some countries systematic early childhood education has been in existence for thousands of years, while in others, the idea of educating pre-school aged children is relatively new (Olmsted, 2000).

Pre-primary education could mean the education given to children from birth up to the age of six years (Charles, Gast, Servey, and Burnise 1978). Maduewesi (1991) defined pre-primary education as a semi-formal arrangement usually outside the home, whereby young children from about age of three are exposed through play-like activities in a group setting for mental, social and physical learning suited to their developmental age, until the mandatory age of government formal schooling.

In the National Policy on Education (2004), Pre-primary education is referred to as the education given in an educational institution to children age 3-5 plus prior their entering the primary school. Pre-primary education programmes have developed both in the developed and developing world for many reasons which include:

- i. The emphasis of a small but growing body of research demonstrating the long term benefits of high quality pre-primary education programmes and thus creating widespread awareness of the importance of the early years in the child's life. Examples of these studies emanate from the United States (Schweiahart, Barnes and Weikart, 1993); Nigeria (Olatunji, 1986) and India (Lai and Wati, 1986).
- ii. Increasing urbanization of developing countries and the high degree of family mobility in some developed countries.
- iii. Increasing incidence of one parent families and the increasing participation of women in the labour force (United Nations, 1996).
- iv. Recent global improvement in infant survival rates which has encouraged giving attention to child development.

In Nigeria specifically, the increase in Pre-primary education is for the following reasons:

- i. The influx of children of various European and American citizens working in different part of the country in the 1960s who attended pre-school and subsequent emulation of the European officials by the Nigerian professionals in sending their children to such schools.
- ii. Increase in industrialization and employment facilities in Nigeria which led to the improvement in the financial status of Nigerians.

- iii. Economic changes following rapid post – independence developments in Nigeria and increase in the rate with which married women picked up jobs.
- iv. Introduction of the UPE and later UBE resulting in scarcity of house-maids and house-boys.

The development and the increase in pre-school institution both in Nigeria and other countries is because of a belief that early education is important. Pre-primary education is important for the children because of the need for cognitive enrichment, social development, custodial guidance, moral development and development of health habits.

In fact, the Federal Government of Nigeria has specified the main purpose of pre-primary education in the National Policy on Education (2004) as follows:

- a. Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- b. Preparing the child for the primary level of education;
- c. Providing adequate care and supervision for children while their parents are at work (on farms, in the market, offices etc).
- d. Inculcating social norms;
- e. 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;
- f. Teaching co-operation and team spirit;
- g. Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc through play; and
- h. Teaching good habits, especially good health habits.

Therefore, pre-primary education provides young children with necessary stimulation and equal educational opportunities for their optimum development irrespective of their home background in Nigeria. However the practice of pre-primary education in Nigeria is lopsided.

The Practice Pre-primary Education in Nigeria

The provisions of the National Policy on Education towards the realization of the numerous objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria are clearly stated in the section 14a of the document. Some of these are:

“establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education and the appropriate level of government will review and enforce the educational laws that relate to the establishment of nursery schools to make sure that schools that are opened are well run, pre-primary teachers are qualified and other infrastructures provided and that ministries of education will make regular inspections to ensure the maintenance of high standard” (FGN, 2004)

In effect, the government established pre-schools are supposed to be model for others in that all the policy pronouncements will be implemented, but in practice, only one year of the pre-school was catered for and all the provisions are not in place. The old Grade II teachers were made to teach in the

section; learning resources are not provided at all; the old unattractive classrooms were converted to the children classroom; learning is never through play but rote learning; no outdoor play equipment is provided. Some privately owned pre-primary schools are far better than what we have in the public schools. This indirectly water down the passion of the private school owners to provide quality education. This proliferation of pre-schools, particularly in the urban areas and even rural areas of the country, coupled with the prohibitive fees charged, and the lack of effective quality control, lack of pre-primary professionally trained teachers and lack of uniformity in the choice of text materials among other deficiencies underscore a major shortcoming in the government policy. This shortcoming calls for reforms in the pre-primary education system.

Moreover in Nigeria, pre-primary education is erroneously conceived as being oriented towards preparatory school learning that is, early childhood schooling where they emphasise Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Pre-school institutions boast of being capable of giving children a head start (a federally funded comprehensive early childhood programme for children from low income families) but usually on the wrong premise of facilitating future book learning (Osanyin, 2002; Obanya, 2004).

Besides, socialization is carried on in English Language, and not in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community as stipulated in the Policy. The blame here should not be only on the proprietors and teachers, Government should also share in the blame because language policy in this level of education should have been made to be solely the language of the immediate community and its implementation should have been strictly enforced.

Also, the games, the toys, the songs the nursery rhymes have no direct relationship with what the growing children are likely to encounter in their immediate environment. Obanya (2004) observed that the result of these alien resources is that instead of laying a solid foundation for life-long learning, Nigeria's early childhood education seems to be laying the foundation for life-long inferiority complex and alienation.

Moreover, access to early childhood care and education is denied over 90% for Nigerian children (Obanya, 2004). Even with government involvement in its provision, thus it is largely institutionalized and so many local communities do not usually own one. The fees the privately owned schools charge and their other requirement in term of food, snacks and uniforms are usually beyond the reach of majority of Nigerians.

The policy and implementation problems in the pre-primary education system can be traced to wrong perception and misconception that majority of stakeholders have in the running of pre-primary education, However, recent global trend in early childhood care and education poses a challenge to correct such perception.

The Contemporary View of Early Childhood Care and Education

The contemporary view on early childhood care and education is not only a national issue but also an international one. It is an expansion and broader view of what early childhood education or pre-primary education used to be. The view is expressed in the first of the six Education for All (EFA) goals as follows:

‘Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhoods care and education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children’

Thus, the Jomtien World Conference on education for All 9 March 1990 Justify the need for emphasis on Early childhood Care Education, and that education begins not just at birth but at conception. The implication of this is that Early Childhood Care and Education goes beyond pedagogy. It entails a lot more than educating and family education. Apart from this, Obanya (2004) opined that we are no longer in the era of nursery education, kindergarten, pre-school education or even early childhood education. The discipline has gone ahead to recognize that all these can be components of what we do, but that none of them takes full account of the all-round development needs of the not-yet-in-school child. This paradigm makes early childhood care and education the first of its six goals. In other words, the international consensus today is that it does not place the required emphasis on comprehensive early childhood care and education.

Furthermore, in order to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, the Nigeria education research and development council (NERDC) in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has evolved an Early Child Care, Development and Education (ECCDE) programme. The programme focus is on such interventions that will improve the holistic development of children between birth and age six, through improve health, nutrition, social, emotional, and psycho-motor development activities, which many pre-school institutions in our nation de-emphasized.

It is a programme that actively involves the support of parents as partners in the development of children. The following objectives of the ECCDE present the contemporary view of what the pre-primary education programmes should be. They are;

- i. Demonstrate and apply low-cost, community- based approaches to early childhood care education which respond to the need of women and children in rural area;
- ii. Develop system of training for young women in rural areas which will enable them to function as workers in community-based early childhood centres.
- iii. Develop a system which based on early childhood centre could address wider needs of women at community level in preparing

them for motherhood, improving their child rearing skills and their understanding of children growth and development needs.

- iv. Reinforce the development of creativity and thinking in children at the formative age.
- v. Improve the process of transmission of social and cultural skills, enhancing the child's self image and identity; and
- vi. Service; employment opportunities for young women halting the drift to the city (NERDC, 1989)

The objectives fill the missing gap in the National Policy on Education on pre-primary education because ECCDE caters for children 0-3 which National Policy on education conspicuously neglected.

In order to bring improvement to pre-primary education in our nation and meet the EFA goal on comprehensive early childhood care and education and ECCDE objectives, the following pertinent issues should be considered as put forward by Obanya (2004):

- i. Having accurate statistics on the number of children aged zero to six, in every locality.
- ii. Ensuring adequate pre-natal care for women, since the foundation for education beginning at birth is laid before the children is born.
- iii. Developing a systematic programme of parents and community sensitization to the psycho-social needs of children, and on affordable and culturally acceptable ways of meeting these needs
- iv. Working with the people to develop comprehensive care and education strategies that fully integrate health, nutrition, socialization, physical development, and intellectual stimulation pre-school children.
- v. Taking appropriate steps to ensure community ownership of such programmes in order to ensure their sustainability.
- vi. Furthermore, the language policy for this level of education should be strictly implemented, and forcefully supervised to ensure compliance.
- vii. Provision of teachers for this level of education should be revisited in order to encourage the mothers who have at least school certificate.

The implication of restricting pre-primary education to early childhood schooling which encourages the future book learning will invariably mean that pre-primary education will still be vulnerable to substandard instead of giving the children the holistic development between birth and age six. If Nigeria is to take any appreciable progress and improvement in the pre-primary education level, the problem facing it must be vigorously addressed, especially by specialists in pre-primary education and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

To say that early year education is highly important to the total development of the child not a new thing again. Any nation that recognises education as an instrument per excellence for the national development will not toy with Early Childhood Education of her citizenry. The situation in Nigeria present might be as a result of the fact that little is known about this level of education, the conception many Nigerian still have about it is as 'j'eleosinmi' (meaning a place to keep the children away from home) has not been totally changed. To be able to maximize the benefits of this education, experts and all stakeholders must be ready to convince the populace by researching, teaching and publicize this important education.

Recommendation

The issues raised in this paper call for teaching, research and development work in area of pre-primary education specialization. This is because the contemporary view of Early Childhood Care and Education calls for greater emphasis on multi-disciplinary as well as trans-disciplinary research. This implies that:

- a. Scholars in early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) should break barriers and build linkages across the foundation, the curriculum and instruction, the educational management of what is now commonly referred to as the educational sciences.
- b. Linkages with the health science, the basic natural sciences, the social sciences, and the applied sciences (Nursing, architecture, agriculture, nutrition, environmental studies) be built to adequately address these areas in relation to fundamentals to child survival, childcare, and early childhood socialization and learning.
- c. Curriculum development works in the area of early childhood care and educations involving different specialization, this have to reflect the contemporary broader view of the field.
- d. Scholars in ECCE should build on the contributions of the various disciplines and sub-disciplines that relate to ECCE to ensure child survival, child care early childhood development and learning.
- e. Advocacy and pressure group in ECCE should persuade government to mainstream ECCE in the contemporary view of the subject.
- f. Communities and families would need to be sensitized to the benefits of genuine ECCE.
- g. The practice of ECCE in the traditional societies should be incorporated in present day practices to avoid caricaturizing.
- h. Adequate supervision and monitoring to ensure compliance with the minimum standards, policies and curriculum of integrated Early Childhood Education and eliminating proliferation of sub-standard and low quality early childhood education programme through proper monitoring

- i. Pre-school establishment should be managed as an institution where stimulation required for the child's proper growth and development are enhance and not facilitating future book learning.
- j. Learning activities in ECCE should be carried on in the language of the immediate environment as recommended by the policy on education. The games, the toys, the songs and the nursery rhymes should have direct relationship with what the growing children are likely to encounter in the immediate environment
- k. Access to, not just any early childhood care and education but quality and standard one should be public and government-oriented and evenly distributed across all communities (rural and urban) of the nation. This will minimize the outrageous school fees and other requirements being charged by the private school owners who against free quality education for Nigerian children.
- l. ECCE laboratory schools in urban and rural areas may be established by the ECCE scholars and these schools can be used for experimentation. Such schools will lead to generating of knowledge as well as to adding value to the teaching and service functions.

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