



Revitalizing Nigerian Education in

Digital Age

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Managing Early Childhood Education for Sustainable Educational Development in Nigeria

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Introduction

Education has been acclaimed an instrument par excellence and as such viewed as a veritable tool for repositioning the nation politically, socially, and economically, effecting positive changes and addressing societal ills. Sustainable development, on the other hand, is that development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environmental Development, 1987). Sustainable development implies growth together with the protection of environmental quality, each reinforcing the other. The essence of this form of development is a stable relationship between human activities and the natural world which does not diminish the prospect for future generations to enjoy qualitative life. Sustainable educational development then is that education which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability and quality of life of future generations. Early childhood education is the bedrock for sustainable educational development.

Early childhood education is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school (FRN, 2004). It is embraced by many parents because of its role in the educational and physical development of the child. Besides, it affords parents the opportunity to attend to their businesses while the children are kept under the custody of trained personnel. Modern nations, including Nigeria, show serious concern for the education of their young ones for obvious reasons. Consequently, provisions are being made in the educational policies of these countries for early childhood or pre-school education. In Nigeria,

section 2 of the National Policy on Education (2004) is devoted to the provisions on early childhood/pre-primary education.

Early childhood education, in the form of nursery school or pre-primary education, as we know it today in Nigeria, is largely a post-colonial development. The semblances of it during the colonial era were the kindergarten and infant classes, which consisted of groups of children considered not yet ready for primary education. As grouping for instruction in schools was not age-based during that period, some children aged six or even more could be found in some of the infant classes. With the phasing out of infant classes, some parents began to feel the need for nursery schools.

Early childhood education consists of the systematic and sustained exposure to the transmission of knowledge for early childhood development in both formal and informal learning situations and through various processes. Child development has to do with the qualitative and quantitative growth of children, and no society can afford to ignore the development and education of these young ones without paying the costs, particularly in the knowledge-saturated world in which we live today. However, to be of maximum value, childhood education requires investment of time and resources by governments, communities, and of course, parents. In general, early childhood education facilities can be categorised as early childhood development (ECD) centres and day care centres for children aged 0-3 years and pre-primary (nursery) schools for children 3-5 years.

International Antecedents of Early Childhood Education

Article 5 of the Jomtien Declaration states "Learning begins at birth". This calls for early childhood care and initial education. This can be provided through arrangements involving families, communities, and institutional programmes. Nigeria not only endorsed this declaration but has given prominence to the needs of early childhood care and development education (ECCDE) in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme announced in 1999.

The federal government of Nigeria and UNICEF, in the spirit of the Jomtien Declaration, have pursued the objectives stated in the above clause through a well-articulated ECCDE Programme. This is in recognition of

the fact that early childhood care and educational stimulation is the basic foundation for lifelong learning and meaningful human development.

In consonance with the Jomtien Declaration, World Summit on Children, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ECCDE became part of the Basic Education Programme components with the realisation that "learning begins at birth". This has provided supportive policy implications at different sectors, like health, social services, agriculture, etc. Many states, including Nigeria, have worked out their own guidelines.

Nigerian National Policy on Education and Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education is given a legal framework by the Nigerian National Policy on Education. As provided for in the policy, the purpose of Early Childhood 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 social norms; inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, and playing with toys, etc. developing a sense of co-operation and team-spirit; learning good habits, especially good health habits; and teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes forms, etc. though play (p.11).

The document lists a number of measures to be taken by government to ensure the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary education. They include

encouraging private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education; making provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education; ensuring that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community; ensuring that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this; regulating and controlling the operation of early childhood education, ensuring adequate training of staff and provision of essential equipment; set and monitor minimum standard for early childcare centres in the country; and ensure

full participation of government, communities and teachers associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities (pp. 11-12).

In addition to these measures, the government (state and local) is required to establish appropriate levels and enforce educational laws that will ensure that established pre-primary schools are well-run, pre-primary teachers are well qualified, and other appropriate academic infrastructures are provided. Ministries of education are expected to ensure maintenance of high standards.

The Child Rights Act (2003) in Tella (2007), the UBE Act (2004), the National Policies on Education, Food, Nutrition, and Health are laws and policies which have given shape to different sectoral interventions on early childhood care and development in Nigeria.

Managerial Problems of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Policy formulation and quality control of early childhood education in Nigeria is the responsibility of the Federal and State Ministries of Education. The official recognition given to early childhood education in the National Policy on Education, combined with a number of factors, gave rise to an unprecedented expansion in the provision of child care and pre-primary education institutions or nursery schools in the country. Nearly all the pre-primary education in the country is provided by private proprietors. Some of these establishments go by the names “day care centres” or “playgroups” 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.

The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) is very specific about the role of government in early childhood education. Section 2 subsection 12 clearly states that

the responsibilities of government for pre-primary education shall be to promote the training of qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable Curriculum and supervise and control the quality of such institutions (p. 11).

Of all the measures the federal government undertook in order to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary education, the only one which is effectively accomplished is the granting of permission for private individuals and organisations to provide early childhood education in the country, with virtually no participation by the public sector. This, in addition to lack of supervision to ensure the maintenance of standards, has led to increases in numbers of both pre-primary and primary education institutions in the country. Significant provision is yet to be made in many teachers’ training institutions in the country for the production of specialist teachers in early childhood education. For the institutions that run a programme for producing such teachers, it is doubtful if they attract many clients as neither the federal nor any state government has established nursery or pre-primary schools where graduates of such a programme 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.

As observed by Ejie (2006), 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 (2004). Enforcing the use of mother tongue in the schools will even run counter to the interests of parents of the children in such schools, most of whom are anxious for their children to acquire the official language (which is English) as early as possible. Until recent times, 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 proprieties 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 immediate community. Contrary to this, almost all parents, especially of the middle and high classes that patronise pre-primary institutions, wish their children to be immersed in English language as early as possible because of the advantages the knowledge of the language conveys on such children in the primary and subsequent levels of the Nigerian educational system. The ease with which children acquire and speak English language

is one of most important criteria parents use to assess the quality of pre-primary institutions in the country.

As observed by Nwankwo (2005), 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 the use of it. 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 play method or any other type of learning activity to inculcate social norms in pre-school children as advocated in the policy document.

Ellyat (2004) argued that education should be centred on the child and that most of their learning should be through play. This type of learning should also involve before-school, during-school, and after-school experience. The National Policy on Education in its objectives encourages learning at the pre-primary level to be carried out through play. Play is, it can be argued, an important and integral part of learning, not only for the child but even for adults. During the act of play, the child has a better opportunity to explore, create, and discover; thereby developing his/her skill and potentials to the maximum. Learning and play occur in tandem as far as the pre-primary school child is concerned.

Ellyat (2004) further argued, from a constructivist point of view, that a child is a constructor of his/her own ideas or activities, where the child is at the centre in relation to others around the environment and the adults or teachers. The result of this relationship might arguably lead to positive results. However, teachers at the pre-primary level quite often base their students' ratings on academic rather than behavioural outcomes and the child's ability to initiate his/her own activities.

State Ministry of Education officials are, in principle, supposed to visit and inspect the physical plant and 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 had 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 the schools for approval. This

explains why nursery and primary schools can be found in any type of location, making use of any type of facility ranging from garage to dilapidated buildings. This does not augur well for sustainable educational development in the nation.

These shortcomings and some other factors have given rise to some problems which are now emerging in this sector of education. One of these is the wide variation in infrastructure and instructional facilities ranging from good to very poor ones with a preponderance of poor ones. The same is true with regards to teachers in the nursery or pre-primary schools. Some of the people employed to teach the children are neither trained to teach nor do they know how to handle or relate with the children. Moreover, as there is no standard curriculum to guide the activities of these teachers in many subject areas, 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 (2001). 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. The foundation for qualitative education starts from the early childhood state. Ineffective management of education of this level has a devastating effect on sustainable educational development of the nation.

Conclusion

In order to realise the objectives of early childhood education as the foundation for sustainable educational development in Nigeria, the problems militating against education at this level must be effectively addressed. The foundation for any meaningful educational development rests in pre-primary and primary education and any attempt to overlook these levels of education either by commission or omission is likely to spell doom for the country. Nigeria is experiencing setbacks at other levels of education (secondary and tertiary) because pre-primary and primary educations have not been given the due attention they deserve in the country.

The Way Forward

The following measures are recommended for effective management of early childhood education for sustainable educational development in Nigeria.

1. Government should ensure the workability of the early childhood sections of public primary schools in the country. This will reduce the level of private involvement in this sector of education, thereby eliminating the problems associated with private provision of education at this level.
2. Inspection, supervision, and monitoring of private early childhood educational institutions by the appropriate government agencies should be ensured and regularised to maintain standard and quality in service delivery.
3. A policy on the use of mother tongue by early childhood educational institutions should be put in force by the government to ensure compliance.
4. The play method should be enforced by the education authorities as the principal teaching method to ensure creativity and inventiveness among the children.
5. Minimum standard should be set and maintained by the relevant education authorities for the operation of all nursery schools in the country. This should touch every aspect of its operation, such as infrastructure, instructional materials, personnel, and site.

6. Private early childhood educational institutions should be categorised and school fees streamlined by the relevant education authorities to avoid undue exploitation.
7. The payment of national minimum wage to staff of early childhood educational institutions in the country should be enforced by the government.

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