



Journal Of Education In Developing Areas

PUBLISHED BY THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT, PORT HARCOURT.

VOL. XI

ISSN 0189 420X

1997

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EDUCATING CHILDREN IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE NIGERIAN ENVIRONMENT

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper overviews childhood education in terms of its actual meaning and need, what constitutes difficult circumstances have been discussed. Finally strategies of coping with the difficult circumstances have been highlighted. In all, commitment on the part of the government and prudent management on the part of teachers and parents have been advocated to ensure continued childhood education in the face of the difficult circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria in the last decade has witnessed a lot of difficulties which has wheeled some circirical influences on a number of institutions in the country. Education has had a lion's share especially as education is erroneously seen as a consumer of funds, efforts and time and not as a producer of a direct and an immediate response to problems in the society. Nevertheless, the thirst for education is even more increased but the circumstances have become very difficult in the present Nigerian situation. This paper overviews the need for children education, examines in detail what constitutes difficulty in the Nigerian environment and finally offers solutions towards educating children despite the difficulties observed.

CHILDREN'S EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

Education has been seen as an umbrella word which covers a wide range of meanings (Obinaju, 1993). All these meanings emphasize the systematic training and instruction especially of the young in school, college or any other institution. Education is said to go further to embrace knowledge and abilities, the development of character and mental powers resulting from such training. Children's education as Emenogu (1992) has it refers to the education of children before the age of twelve. According to him also, it is the period when the "foundation for child's growth is laid" and it extends through the pre-primary and primary schools. In fact, children's education refers to the equipment of the child with mental, social and physical abilities to grapple with life in the present and future. It starts at birth and includes the relationships which are formed at home prior to entry into any type of formalised educational institution. Children's education also includes the type of education obtained in pre-primary institutions for those who can

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afford it and the type obtained in primary schools. Right from birth when the care-giver relates to the child for him to acquire any type of understanding, the child is taught some attributes which will help him in survival.

For the purpose of this discussion, it would be convenient to divide the period of childhood education into three major stages. The first one ranges between birth and the commencement of any form of formal education (0-2 years). During this period, the child gains gratification mainly from home and care givers. He relates to his father, mother, other siblings (if any) and others in the home. He learns the language of the immediate environment and spends his time developing bones and muscles. According to Mitchell (1984), his life is full of activities and depending on nutrition and other environmental conditions, the child grows up to attain pre-primary school age.

The second stage starts in some children at age two when they are received into the kindergarten and in some others at three when they are received into nursery one. At this stage, there is a break from the home environment. The child's environment now constitutes the teacher, other children of his age and the larger school environment. He only goes back home for some hours of the day. His life continues to be that of activity and play but is punctuated by regularization of meals.

The third stage starts from about age six when the child starts education. At this stage, the child's curriculum has some serious components. He is taught a number of subjects ranging from Mathematics to Agricultural Science. He must learn to get along with the teacher. This stage can be subdivided into several other stages depending upon the developmental stages of the child but educationally it is viewed as the same since primary education leads to the same terminal goal. In some children however, the second stage is non-existent as the child continues to stay at home and only comes into the primary school at about age five or six. In the Nigerian situation, children who constitute this last category occupy well over 90% of the total number of children. Only a negligible percentage of children and well-to-do parents have clearly marked three stages as presented above.

The need for childhood education does not require any emphasis as everybody appears to be very conscious that childhood education is the bedrock of every other level of education. In recognition of this, the National Policy on Education (1981) considers primary education, just as the other earlier stages, as foundation-laying stages of higher levels of education. In formal pre-primary education, the stipulated objectives include "preparing the child for the primary level of education", "inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity", and teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes as well as good habits.

In primary education, the objectives show "inculcation", "laying of foundation" and "developing" in children, permanent literacy, scientific and reflective thinking, character and above all "providing basic tools for further educational advancement".

Psychologists do not joke with this period in child's life as they consider it the critical period for the introduction of the basics of life in cognitive, social and psychomotor domains. Parents seem to be currently aware of these therefore they too strive to educate their children early in life. Unfortunately there seem to be impediments in the form of "difficult circumstances" which impede the efforts of both government and parents in the education of children. A careful look so as to identify these difficult circumstances would make us ready to attempt examining solutions towards the education of Nigerian children irrespective of the "difficult circumstances".

WHAT CONSTITUTES DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES IN NIGERIA

This discussion recognises that what may be considered a difficult circumstance in one situation may turn out to be a favourable circumstance in another situation. Therefore, in this discussion, circumstances which are seen not to be in the interest of quality education are considered as difficult circumstances. These include circumstances which may not directly be related to education. This is especially so, as Obinaju (1995) observes, that even some social activities which were started with no intention for it to affect education, turn out to wield tremendous influences and affect education in various ways. In the discussion therefore such issues as economy, policy and culture will be touched among others.

ECONOMY

During the 1990s, the economy of Nigeria is said to be "bad". Workers are no longer able to feed themselves and their families adequately with their salaries. There are incessant strike actions by bank workers, private companies as well as public servants all asking for pay increase. In such circles, the only attempt to pacify them by their employers is the explanation that the economy is bad. Obinaju (1993:60) observes that there is a significant relationship between economy and education because economy provides funding to education. If economy is bad therefore, it stands to reason that it can no longer provide the necessary funding to education.

From an individual's point of view, when there is inflation and the income can no longer feed the family, there is bound to be a reduction in the quality and quantity of food provided for the family. Faw (1980) recognises the importance of good food, in the form of a balanced diet, to the growing child. In many Nigerian homes, the diets are no longer balanced. This, of course, does not offer the growing child optimal growth and development which will in turn enhance his educational ability.

The factor is also responsible for the lack of provision of educational materials for children in schools. Education in Nigeria is said to have been free at the primary school level right from 1976 but parents still provide books (textbooks and exercise books), uniforms and in most cases desks and stools. The provision of all these items follow the Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. It is only when the family is no longer threatened by

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starvation that some money can be allotted to provision of these school needs. Therefore children are seen attending school without the essential requirements of schooling.

Poor economy on its own contributes to late payment of teachers' salaries and non payment of other benefits. Therefore, the level of commitment of the teacher is affected. Obinaju (1996) views this as a driving force behind the teacher's exploration of other avenues for survival and when salaries are finally paid, he is unwilling to return his full attention to his profession as his extra-professional occupation may be fetching even more income than his salary.

Even when salaries are paid regularly, non-provision of school materials/requirements constitute a difficult circumstance for the teacher to cope with. Where he teaches but pupils have no pencils to write with, the former feels frustrated. Infrastructure is another area of provision which is often neglected. Many classrooms today are found under trees owing to collapsed school buildings and no replacement. Others are in dilapidated buildings, yet others have up to three arms of the same class merged into one classroom.

POLICY

The policy which has just been reversed of handing over primary education to local government authorities had been a very unfortunate decision. This is because proper attention was not given to primary education. The situation led to non payment of teachers salaries for several months and non provision in several other spheres for primary schools. It is the same situation which weakened teachers' commitment to the course of children's education to the poor state witnessed today such that even now that the decision has been reversed, the commitment level of teachers is still difficult to reverse.

Another policy which constitutes a difficult circumstance is that despite the awareness of the necessity of pre-primary education by government as evident in the *National Policy on Education* (1981:10), the government of Nigeria has not taken any lead in the provision of this level of education. Rather, it leaves the provision to "private efforts". Private schools are fee paying and must run so as to make gain. Thus over-crowded classrooms, unqualified teachers and some exploitative levies are regular features. Yet, the Nigerian child is said to have a right to education and primary education is also said to be free.

CULTURE

When there is a basic conflict between the practices of the people and the requirements of the school, a difficult circumstance arises. During farming periods of a particular area as well as on big market days, children are seen to be absent from school. Reasons for this includes that there would be nobody to bring them back from school and/or those who are old enough must participate in the family occupation. At least they can take care of the younger ones while the adults go to farms or markets as the case may be. This type of

practice constitutes a difficult circumstance for the school and the teacher as subjects taught for the day are not to the benefit of all the pupils.

POOR CURRICULUM/MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS

As it has been observed above, public schools have lost their right of place in the minds of well meaning Nigerians. Many of them today patronize private schools for whatever it is worth. Many of these private schools are not owned by specialist in the area of childhood education and may not also know what constitutes a curriculum for that level of education. Unqualified teachers who do not know how to implement the curriculum are also brought in and the management of the school reflects the management of a solely commercial enterprise with strategies to ensure only financial gains even when this may not be in the interest of the children. To the government and the parents who desire proper education for their children, these constitute difficult circumstances.

THE SOCIETY

The moral environment in Nigeria is depressing. There is corruption everywhere, in the market place, in the school, among law enforcement agents etc. The basic question now is how does one educate the child to embrace the appropriate social ideals when the reverse is practiced in the society even to the observance of the pupils?

Parents no longer appreciate the worth of formal education especially as those who are seen to have "made it" in life are not so much those who passed through formal education. Formal education in their view is seen as a waste of the child's time and a diversion of attention from what may be more beneficial to the child. This attitude sometimes manifests itself in parents unwillingness to allow their children attend school regularly. Many parents send their children hawking wares, others get them engaged in one trade or the other.

All these factors constitute different facets of difficult circumstances to the education of children in the contemporary society. They either affect the schools or the child directly. Parents, teachers and the government are seen to be much bothered by these circumstances. They, therefore, must rise to the challenge of providing innovation and strategies towards alleviating these challenging circumstances so that children's education, a worthwhile venture, will continue to survive in Nigeria.

PROPOSALS TOWARDS THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITHIN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

From the above, it can be easily seen that childhood as well as primary education is suffering tremendously from factors which arise from poor economy, policies and political trends in the country as well as from negative societal influences. The proposals

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given below offer strategies of coping with the difficult circumstances while attempts are made to ameliorate the existing situation.

From the economy standpoint, education at the primary school level has been said to be free since September 1976. This should mean that there should be no payment of fees in any primary school in the country, be it public or private. Private schools should be given grants by the government while public schools should be fully run by the government. When the tuition at the primary school level is satisfactorily paid by government, one would be sure that it has provided opportunity for the foundation to be laid. Other levels of education can then pay minimal fees to off-set the running cost of the schools.

The government should also be aware that “the economy is bad” and should not delay salaries and other entitlements of teachers. Less emphasis and allocation should be given to “transition programmes” and such allocations should be sent to salvage childhood education as the product of this education are the citizens of the tomorrow society.

Public schools should be improved upon. As government at present is the largest employer of the best qualified teachers, it stands the chance of delivering the best quality of education. When there are sufficient classrooms, furniture, offices, supports and teaching equipment, the quality of the school will be enhanced. Quality which is intended can only then be achieved. When the government improves upon the quality of public schools, with the quality of teachers noted above there will no longer arise the need to send children to private schools and all the attendant “difficult circumstances” of poor curriculum and management will be avoided.

In recognition of difficult times, the policy makers should ensure that textbooks are not changed very often except there is obvious need to do so. This is because younger siblings can benefit from books used by older ones. Teachers should not insist on having the child start each class with a new exercise book just because it is a new academic session. A culture of continuing to write each subject on the remaining pages of the former exercise book for that subject should be established. By so doing, the child would appreciate the continuity of the topics and it will help the parents in the reduction of the books to be provided at the beginning of the session.

Teachers are encouraged to improvise in order to provide themselves with teaching aids. If the government does not provide aids, the harm is done to our children and our society. The teacher should therefore try as much as possible to improvise to make his lesson meaningful. Obinaju (1995a) offers a central storage and production centre per school as a solution to the existing dearth of instructional material use in pre-primary and primary institutions in Nigeria. Once produced, instructional materials can be stored for later usage or for the use of some other person within the same locality, thereby reducing the cost of producing several and as need arises.

For the health of the child, parents are encouraged to source for nutritious foods among locally available food substances. Vegetables and beans should not be excluded from the

diet of the child as these provide the child with vitamins and protein respectively. Meat and milk may be unattainable these days as the economy continues to be poor. The Parents Teachers Association can be a forum for this type of awareness. On the other hand, the nurses can also incorporate this in their numerous deworming and inoculation awareness campaigns.

There is need for the government to lead by example. It is hereby noted, and strongly too, that over 90% of Nigerian children are not having pre-primary education. It is also noted that these years which are left to chance are the actual formative years of the child. Therefore, the government should attach pre-primary classes, as a matter of urgency, to every existing primary school in the country. This will reduce the chances of leaving these years to private, business conscious proprietors of nursery/primary schools. It will also reduce wastage of the formative years.

CONCLUSION

Any difficult circumstance calls for prudence. The government has to be prudent in her disbursement of education at all levels. She should be ready to show more commitment to education than what obtains at present. She should never start a project which she is not adequately prepared to handle like the free primary education. When it is started, every commitment should be paid to see that it succeeds. Commitment in this sense does not leave room for poor teacher's welfare and non-provision of infrastructure and teaching materials. Prudence on the part of the parents and teachers calls for improvisation and making the best use of the available. Childhood education is too precious to be allowed jeopardy because of "difficult circumstances".

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