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SPACE CONSIDERATION IN PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that the trend in the provision of Pre-primary education in Nigeria today is that anybody who has an uncompleted building, a garage, or a building of whatever nature can bring in young children and call it a nursery school. This practice is initiated by government's encouragement of private participation in the provision of pre-primary education and her lukewarm attitude to setting a standard and show good example by the provision of this level of education despite several appeals (Obinaju, 1994, Onibokun et al 1985). The above practice goes on without any consideration to what pre-primary education is geared towards achieving. The situation is worse when the school is located in an already built environment because there are no moderations, alterations or modifications to the existing/previous accommodation or the environment in order to suit the purpose of pre-primary education. The occurrence of the above situation raises a lot of worry:

- Are there any specific objectives for pre-primary education?
- Are there any set spatial standard for opening a pre-primary school?
- Is there any positive contribution that adequate space management could provide for pre-primary education?
- What type of space is required for pre-primary education?
- How would space contribute towards the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria?
- Is there any recommendation of spatial provision for pre-primary education for optimal functionality?

This paper will attempt an examination of the above issues and recommend measures appropriate to matters relating to space and pre-primary education.

PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION: MEANING AND OBJECTIVES

Pre-primary education refers to education given to the child before the child attains school age. This type of education can be divided into two significant parts; informal education given to the child from birth to the age of 2 or 3 and formal pre-primary education which 'nursery' schools provide. From home the child learns through reflexes the cues of the immediate environment. In Erikson's opinion, the child learns trust or mistrust before he is one year old, autonomy or doubt between the ages of 2 and 3 and initiative or guilt before he is 5 years of age. All these depend on whether the needs of the child are met or not, whether parents and others care and communicate genuine affection or not, and, more importantly, whether the environment is safe and dependable or not (Biehler and Snowman 1982).

Specifically, the National Policy on Education (1981: 10) defines pre-primary education as "education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 plus prior to their entering the primary school." This policy also provides as objectives for this level of education

- effecting a smooth transition from home to school.
- preparing the child for the primary level of education.
- providing adequate care and supervision for the child 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,
- teaching co-operation, team spirit and social norms.

It would be observed that the policy has overlooked one stage of pre-primary education - that which is given at home by parents, maids and other care givers before the child is two years old. In many Nigerian homes, this type of education continues until the child is 5 years old when he can start primary education. Perhaps the policy assumes that these objectives should guide all systems of pre-primary education be it informal like the one practised at home or formal like that provided by nursery schools.

The above among other objectives stated for this level of education seem to require one vital ingredient in its implementation as a condition towards the achievement of the objectives. This vital requirement is space.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY SPACE?

Space in the broad sense of the word refers to the medium in which all objects exist and move. In another consideration Hornby (1974) defines space as an interval or distance between two or more objects. In our discussion, the two definitions suit our purpose. Space can be described by addition of adjectives to give specifications of what is actually referred to; as in the case when the architect talks about "floor space" or when the Airforce Officer accuses another country of making incursions into the nation's air space." In early childhood education, space refers to a provision of a 3-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction.

Space as the totality in which all objects exist and move can be apportioned. In fact this is the pre-occupation of bodies like the Capital City Development Authority and Town Planning Authority. Therefore, in consideration that space can be

apportioned such that the space allotted to one agency would have boundaries, one is armed to discuss space requirement and provision for pre-primary education.

Space requirement in pre-primary education is broadly divided into two main areas - indoor space and outdoor space. Both have their specific contributions to the education of the child at the level in focus.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF SPACE TOWARDS ACHIEVEMENT OF PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION OBJECTIVES

From the objectives stated above, space is indispensable as a requirement. For one to have a 'smooth transition from the home to the school,' the child is expected to achieve some level of independence. He is expected to walk on his own without support, run, jump and to engage in some individual play with toys, sand or water depending on what would interest him at the particular time. He also needs to have some time which he can operate on his own without having to be with the parents or caretakers. By so doing he would be able to go to school and operate with some amount of independence without excessive trauma brought about by leaving home. To achieve all these, space for the child to operate in is required. For him to walk, run, jump and gain stability, he requires space. Obinaju (1992a) observes that children in rural area with space to their advantage demonstrate more independence when compared to their counterparts in the urban area. Therefore the child at the pre-primary stage requires space for him to play his ball either by kicking or by throwing. For his toys to be scattered so that he can pick out the colour he wants, he requires space. For water trough and his measuring vessels, for sand tray and his funnels, he requires space.

Erikson (1963) quoted in Biehler and Snowman (1982: 37) states "if toddlers are permitted and encouraged to do what they are capable of doing at their own pace and in their own way - but with judicious supervision by parents and teachers - they will develop a sense of autonomy." By implication, if parents and teachers are impatient, and for fear of the child injuring himself, they interfere unduly with the child's activities, the child will develop doubt about his ability to deal with his environment. If care is to be provided such that the child can exercise himself with adequate safety, then there must be ample space which would enable falling down and getting up without the child injuring himself. When children play together - an activity which will initiate and encourage co-operation, team spirit, and an activity which offers the teacher the opportunity to inculcate in the child the required social norms - they need space. It is not uncommon for one child to pick up a toy, go off running and get pursued by another child while they are at play. All these happen when they have enough space and things are not crowded together.

More importantly, the child is required by the National Policy on Education (1981) to acquire the spirit of enquiry and creativity. This policy recognises that the only potent avenue of bringing this about is through the child's exploration exercises - of nature and the local environment. He also acquires these through playing with toys and through musical activities. Exploration as we all know cannot be done if the child is restricted to a particular location. Space and some freedom must be given to the child to operate. Moreover, musical activities as described by Obinaju (1992b: 134) requires the child to 'dance, jump and gesticulate according to the rhythm or the instruction of the music.' He also postulates that musical activities contribute positively to the pre-primary child's social, physical and cognitive development.

From the above discussion one can see how space provision would contribute towards the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary education but one may want to ask what type of space is needed what would be the minimum recommended spatial provision to permit functionality in pre-primary education.

RECOMMENDED SPACE PROVISION FOR PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

There has been a guideline of dimension stipulated by the Ministry of Education for pre-primary classroom. This dimension is 12m by 6.5m to accommodate 25 pupils. Unfortunately, school operators neither respect the dimension of the classroom nor the number. Obinaju (1994) observes that many more children are put into far smaller rooms for pre-primary instruction. This situation is of course undesirable. Figure I is a recommended sketch of a standard pre-primary classroom/activity room which provides adequate space for each activity.

In Fig. 1, it would be observed that enough space has been provided at the middle for free flow of traffic. Permanent activity corners have been provided for children to choose and 'play' with, depending on the area of interest of the particular child at the given time. Wash rooms, toilets and racks for towels have been provided and it serves sanitation purposes in the class. Space provision as provided in the pre-school classroom minimizes accidents, delays, interruptions and other inconveniences while at the same time maximizing learning opportunities, health and safety through the recommended play approach (NPE, 1981).

Outdoor space as recommended by this paper is illustrated in Fig. 2. This diagram provides for administrative block, sick bay, store, classrooms and security post while, at the same time providing for space for running, jumping and falling in adequate safety. Space for immovable nursery games activity is also provided. This provision is made for maximum of 100 children, at the rate of 25 children per activity room. In fact this quadrangular drawing can be repeated as many times as possible depending on the number of children in the school. The field provision as well as other outdoor provision has to be repeated also if the school has to admit more than the initial one hundred provided for by this sketch.

Fig. 1. SKETCH OF A RECOMMENDED PRE-PRIMARY CLASSROOM

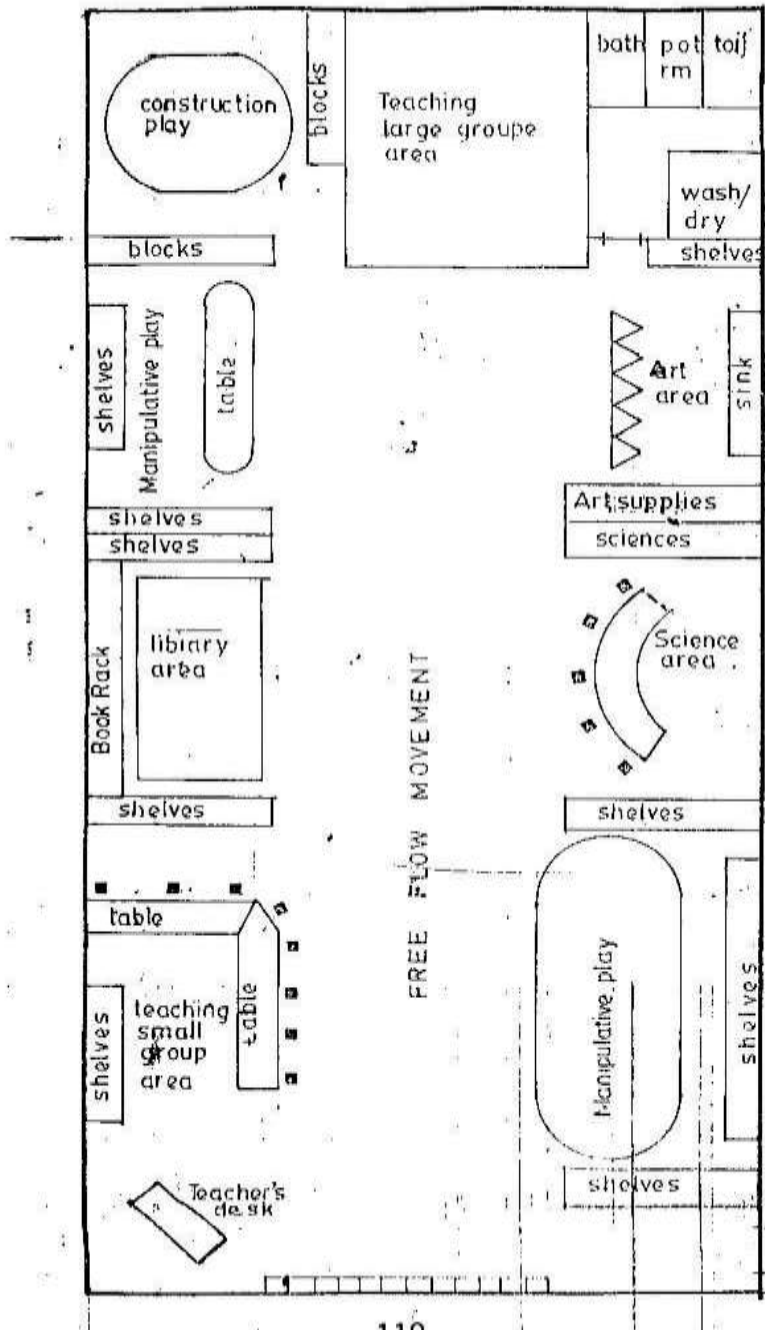
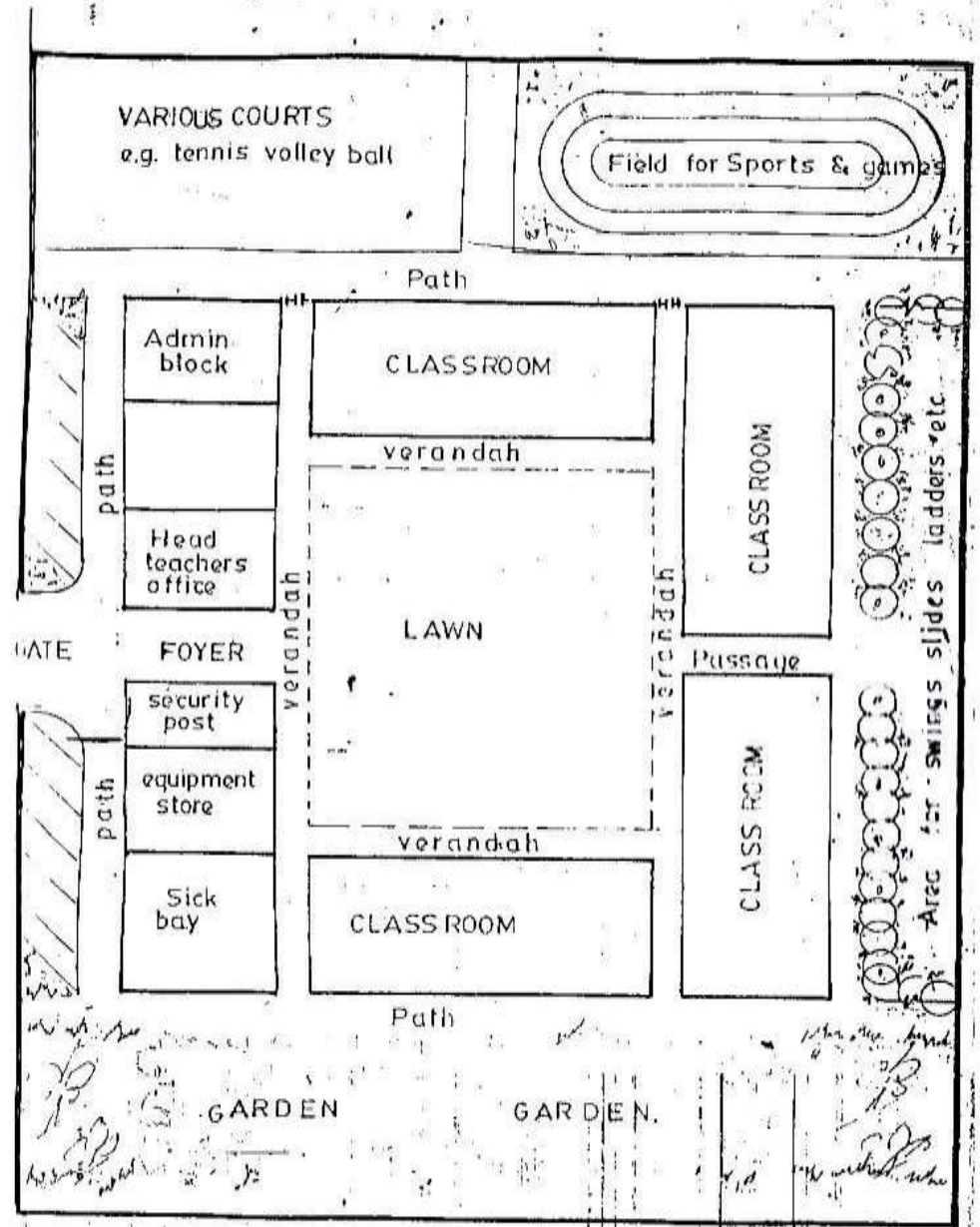


Fig. 2: A SKETCH SHOWING RECOMMENDED SPACE PROVISION IN A PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL



CONCLUSION

Out of growing concern about the widening disparity and sometimes unsuitable spatial provision for pre-primary education, this paper has undertaken to examine the contribution of space towards the achievement of the national objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria. It has gone further to recommend spatial dimensions for both indoor and outdoor activities in a model pre-primary school. It is hoped that this recommendation would be adopted and implemented so that the question of disparity in provision, unsuitable accommodation, overcrowding in pre-primary classes and child safety while in school would be laid to rest once and for all. When this is done we would be sure that the pre-primary environment in combination with trained personnel is providing functional education to our children.

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