



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: G
LINGUISTICS & EDUCATION
Volume 14 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2014
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Policy Implementation in Pre-Primary Education in Nigeria

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GJHSS-G Classification : *FOR Code : 740102p*



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Policy Implementation in Pre-Primary Education in Nigeria

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Abstract- Pre-primary education is considered by many societies and individuals to be beneficial to young children for their educational development from school-entry age. This type of education was given official recognition by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education. In the policy document, provision is made for a policy on pre-primary education stating its objectives and the measures to be taken by government to facilitate the achievement of the policy objectives. It also allowed for private participation in the provision of pre-primary education. This paper examines the implementation of the policy pointing out its shortcomings and some attendant problems, and the way forward.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Modern societies show serious concern for the education of their young ones for obvious reasons. It is common practice in most societies to make provision for pre-primary education programmes of various sorts for children below the official school-going age (usually three to five years) mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools.

It should be noted that not all are agreed on the need for or effectiveness of such pre-primary education programmes for subsequent educational development of children. Some early writers on this issue hold the view that young children are not mature enough to learn complex skills demanded by pre-school educational programmes and that the warmth of mother love and the fostering of children's emotional security are more important than any form of educational programme (Robinson & Robinson, 2000). Some contend that pre-primary years should be utilized in firmly grounding the child in his/her sub-culture and that exposing him/her to pre-school programmes which emphasize intellectual skills would impose middle class values on the child and destroy the positive aspects of his/her sub-culture. Furthermore, some leading scholars in pre-primary education have doubted the wisdom in exposing young children very early to formal education, expressing the fear that the short-term academic gains would be offset by the long-term stifling of their motivation and self-initiated learning. In the same vein, (Akinkuotu & Oyeyemi, 2011) cautioned that early academic gains in reading skills associated with formal instruction of

preschoolers could have long-term negative effects on achievement.

Robinson and Robinson (2000) have argued, that beginning early to educate children should not pose any dangers, as it is difficult to see how pleasant experiences, stimulating within reasonable limits, and logically sequenced, can be harmful to mental health or to cognitive development. Moreover, some research evidences indicate that early childhood education have positive influences in children's affective, conceptual and social development in subsequent years.

II. PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Pre-primary education in the form of nursery school or early childhood 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. The demand for nursery education was, however, very low until recent times (Okoro, 2004).

The idea of pre-primary education was strongly influenced by the stream of thought from Adesina (1977) believed that one major shortcoming of the Third National Development Plan was that it was disturbingly silent on the whole question of pre-school education. The silence became inexplicable in the face of the mounting number of nursery and pre-primary institutions which abounds in the urban areas of the country. The conspicuous omission of policy statements relating to pre-school education according to him, was attributed to the inadequate understanding of the whole concept of pre-school education by the government. Presently, there are so many ill-equipped, sub-standard kindergarten and nursery institutions scattered all over the urban centers and some in the rural centres of Nigeria. Standards or quality is an anathema to most of these pre-primary institutions. Is there inspectorate unit in any of the Ministries of Education in the country solely charged to determine which and which schools are not built on standards, not to talk about the over commercialization of most of them? Most nursery schools even charge higher fees than what many model

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secondary schools and even Federal universities do charge. The extra-ordinarily prohibitive high cost has not been reciprocally matched by an encouraging provision of facilities and basic equipment.

The pre-primary education is the ultimate foundation stone needed by the child to smoothly transit to the formal school system at the primary level. Any shaky foundation here naturally will affect other levels. Ironically, the policy statements on this level of education are a failed one.

In the National Policy on Education (2004) "Policy", the Government committed herself extensively as to the measures she will take to achieve the stated objectives for pre-primary education. Regrettably, however, six years after the last revision (2004) have been made, most of the measures and proposals are still mere paper formalities. While the government proposed assisting private efforts in the establishment of these institutions, what obtains now is a far cry from all expectations. As "the spirit directs" these private individuals, they open these institutions without adequate planning. What we have on the ground are more of "pigry", the aftermath being a systematic mal-adjustment of our young ones. Where even standard ones exist, they are relatively few and concentrated within the urban centres and later become elitist.

The government in the "Policy" further made more undertaken in the area of making provisions in the Teachers Training Colleges for students who want to specialize in pre primary education. In spite of this, it is a known fact that some of these institutions including the Universities, have little or no provisions for this aspect of our educational system. This set-up has led to the drafting of graduates of Colleges of Education who were originally prepared for the secondary schools system to nursery schools. This situation could be better with some institutes of education/departments of our universities bracing up with this challenge.

The "Policy" further states that the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC) while orthography and textbooks of Nigerian languages will be produced to aid this. Ironically, however, in most of our existing pre-primary institutions, the medium of instruction is the English language. The centrality of language to the teaching-learning process, the importance of Nigerian languages to the protection, preservation, promotion of Nigerian culture, and inter-ethnic cohesion, the enhancement of human dignity, the necessity of learning a major language for purposes of promoting national unity and integration have constitutional backing in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and even justification in the NPE (Emenanjo, 2001). The use therefore of English Language to the neglect of the mother tongue as medium of instruction alienates the child from his culture which the "Policy" is meant to protect. Evidence has

shown that a child learns better and develops faster intellectually, psychologically and cognitively if he is taught with the mother-tongue continuously over a period of time. Ironically, this is not the case presently because most parents want their children to be taught in English language at this level and even measure the standard of education these schools give to their children's ability to speak English language (Alani, 1994).

The failed language policy of the NPE is not just the pre-primary education but also primary and post-primary levels of education and has brought about many criticisms from many language experts. Some of the problematic question posed include: Do not the statements on language constitute just a statement of intent rather than a serious programme for implementation?; if the mother-tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC) is considered so important at the pre-primary level as an integral part of the child's culture and the link between the home and the school, why should it be "principally" and not "solely" used at this level?; if the MT or the LIC is considered a very important medium for achieving initial, functional, and permanent empowerment, literacy, and numeracy, why should it be only used "initially" and not throughout the whole of primary education? So many questions but few answers.

III. THE NATIONAL POLICY ON PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

In the current *National Policy on Education* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998) early childhood education is labelled as pre-primary education and is defined as the education given in an educational institution to children aged three to five plus before their entering the primary school. As stated in the policy document, the purpose of pre-primary education includes, among others:

- i. Providing a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- ii. Preparing the child for the primary level of education;
- iii. Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work;
- iv. Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, and the local environment, playing with toys and musical activities, etc.
- v. Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes forms, etc. through play, and
- vi. Inculcating social norms.

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:

- i. Encouraging private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education;
- ii. Making provision in Teacher Training institutions for production of specialist teachers in pre-primary education;
- iii. Ensuring that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the local community;
- iv. Ensuring that the main method of teaching in pre-primary institutions will be through play;
- v. Regulating and controlling the operation of pre-primary education, ensuring adequate training of staff and provision of essential equipment.

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

IV. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The official recognition given to pre-primary education in the *National Policy on Education* (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1977) combined with a number of factors to give rise to an expansion in the provision of child care and pre-primary education institution or nursery schools in the country. Nearly all the pre-primary education in the country, however 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 pre-primary 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. This practice which has almost faded away was mainly for reasons of economy in the early eighties and for the fear by some parents that their children would contract some diseases in the day care centres and nursery schools many of which were sub-standard. Variations in provision make the registration of these institutions somehow difficult for Ministry of Education officials.

Very few of the establishments operate as child-care or child-minding units only; others operate as both child-care units and nursery schools. Most of them accept children aged two into their nursery sections who later transit to the primary sections of the later transit to the primary sections of the same establishments at the age of five or even less.

However, owing to the high demand for pre-primary education by parents, it does not take a long time for newly established pre-primary institutions to grow and develop.

Nowadays nursery schools are located in various places and buildings – campuses of some universities and colleges, premises of some industrial and business organizations, church premises, residential buildings some part or the whole of which are hired for use as nursery schools only or both nursery and primary schools, and so on, while some are set up mainly in some towns as full nursery and primary schools with their own building and premises. The physical structures vary widely in terms of quality and fields from one establishment to another.

With the possible exception of the few nursery schools established by some universities, colleges of education, companies and a few rich individuals, teacher quality is generally low. It is only a few of the nursery schools especially those owned by educational institutions, private companies and wealthy individuals that can afford to engage the services of university graduate teachers and the holders of Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE) qualifications. Most others employ a few N.C.E. teachers (if any at all), who are usually underpaid, while others employ mainly Grade Two teachers and secondary school leavers with the School Certificate or General Certificate (Ordinary Level) qualification. The nursery schools that engage the services of qualified teachers, especially those owned by private individuals usually charge high fees while those that charge relatively low fees usually employ unqualified teachers. Employing unqualified teachers who receive low pay is a strategy used by many proprietors to make their services affordable to a great majority of parents and at the same time maintain a satisfactory profit margin.

Although the *National Policy on Education* prescribes that the child in the pre-primary institution should be involved in active learning, the document detailing guidelines on provision and management of pre-primary education is silent on the curriculum contents of such an institution (Federal Ministry of Education, 1987). In the absence of such guidelines and copies of the curriculum for pre-primary education, proprietors and teachers resort to curricular of their choice.

The curriculum of a typical nursery school owned by most private individuals includes alphabets, numbers, colouring and story time and, in some cases, rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. This emphasis is mostly on the intellectual development of the children. Much more time is devoted to the learning of alphabets and memorization of facts, information, poems and some short passages from various books in English language than to recreational and social activities. Emphasis is laid on children's intellectual development. This is because the yardstick for assessing the quality or effectiveness of nursery schools by parents seems to be the age at which the children attending them are able to count, recognize the

alphabet, read and, in particular, recite memorized information, poems, verses and passages. The younger the age at which children attending a particular school can do these, the higher the quality of the school is adjudged to be by members of the public, and the more patronage it is likely to receive from parents if the fees charged are not excessive. In the attempt to show how effective their nursery schools are, the proprietors of some combined nursery and primary schools admit children at the age of two and allow them to transit to the primary section of such schools at the age of five or even four, both of which are below the official school-going age. This transition to primary education below the official entry age often receives a nod from those parents who wish to show how fast their children can progress through the educational system, and how intelligent they are.

V. SUGGESTIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

If pre-school age children in the country are to benefit from the lofty objectives of pre-primary education policy, there is the need for the Federal, State and Local Governments to ensure that relevant facilities are available in both rural and urban areas. The above-mentioned initiative on early childcare undertaken by the UNICEF holds good promise for narrowing the gap in pre-primary education provision between rural and urban areas if vigorously pursued. Various local governments in the country should come to the aid of rural areas as far as the provision of pre-primary education facilities is concerned. Matching grants or any other type of grants could be given to communities to set up such institutions if the government cannot set them up for them unaided (Mexicobi 2006) such communities can then run them at reduced costs to parents. A more even spatial distribution of pre-primary school facilities can be effected by devolving responsibility for that level of education on local governments.

Whether or not local governments are given such roles, there is still the need for Federal or State governments to set up and run few model pre-primary education institutions to serve as a guide to proprietors who are interested in establishing theirs (Aminu, 1990).

There is the need for state ministry education officials to enforce the regulations laid down by the Federal Ministry of Education in regard to the provision of pre-primary education. Effective quality monitoring units should be set up by state Ministries of Education and provided with necessary logistic support to ensure that minimum standards are maintained in both public and private pre-primary institutions. Preschool educational institutions that do not meet the minimum standards specified by any state's Ministry of Education should be closed down, to be reopened only when the provider complies with the laid down standards. The

Federal Government should take positive steps to that programmes for producing teachers who specialize in early childhood education do not only exist in some of the nation's teacher education institutions but are entered into by teacher education candidates. This can be achieved by offering various incentives to such teacher education candidates. In addition, each state of the federation should add on nursery sections in some of their primary schools where the products of such programmes can find employment.

VI. SUMMARY

Available evidence suggests that pre-primary education has a positive influence on educational development of children in later life and some writers on pre-primary education have asserted that investing in it can yield high returns (Barnett, 2006; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003), common sense dictates, however, that it is not any type of educational experience offered anywhere by any type of teacher that can have such an effect on children. The objectives of pre-primary education in the country can only be achieved if the policy is consistently and effectively implemented. For this to happen, government, especially at the local level, should show more interest in pre-primary education by providing some of the facilities and funds and must make sure that all those measures stated in the policy document aimed at facilitating the achievement of the objectives are put in place. More effective control should be exercised over the establishment of nursery schools. Approvals should be given to building plans of nursery schools before construction work starts in order to standardize some of the infrastructural facilities. These facilities should be inspected and declared adequate before the admission of the first batch of children. Effective measures should be taken to ensure that such facilities are available to children in rural areas. Very importantly, the facilities and activities in these schools should be closely monitored and regularly inspected to enhance the quality of their educational programmes.

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