

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the concept and importance of Education and National Development. Challenges facing early childhood Education which have to do with establishment of early childhood/pre-primary (Nursery) school curriculum, mode of curriculum delivery, monitoring and Evaluation and the teacher are presented. Suggestions as to what should be done for improvement with respect to vision for 2020 and beyond are presented. Conclusively, the establishment of pre-primary school settings, its control and operation require full involvement of government. The curriculum, teachers and other resources that facilitate learning must be qualitative and monitored from time to time so that the products will be appropriately developed in order to contribute to national development.

INTRODUCTION

Education is transmission of what is Worthwhile from generation to generation. It is a process of assisting learners to acquire knowledge, skills and acceptable attitudes and moral behaviors that would make them responsible citizens able to take care of themselves and their families and contribute to society. According to Annan (1999), globally education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation, he said; rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable development. Abad and Fenoy (2007) summarily stated that education develops an individual to develop his environment and ultimately his nation.

Many nations at different times have tried devise means of making it possible for every member of the society to be educated since education has been identified as the major instrument to achieve man's quest for improvement. Nwogwu (1976) noted that the right to education became a global issue after the experiences of the First World War, 1914 – 1918, the soviet Great Revolution of 1917

and the Second World War, 1939 – 1945. These events had international consequences which made people recognize the place of education in individual and national development.

Nigeria is among the nations of the world that value education. In her National policy on education (FRN 2004:4), education is defined as an instrument “per excellence” for effecting national development. Thus education will be used to achieve the nation’s needs. The policy provides guideline on the education of the Nigerian society. It contains the philosophy of the nation’s education levels of education and their objectives beginning with Early childhood/pre-primary Education.

Early childhood/pre-primary Education as referred to in the policy is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten. Its purposes are to effect language of the immediate environment, develop the orthography of many more Nigerian Languages produce textbooks in Nigerian Languages; ensure that the method of teaching is through play with the curriculum of teacher education oriented to achieve this; regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education. Teacher pupil ratio shall be 1:25 minimum standard for early child care centres will be set and monitored by the government, communities and teacher associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early childhood formally covers the first five years of life. These early childhood years are when experiences and interactions with parents, family members and other adults influence the way a child’s brain develops, with as much impact as such factors as adequate nutrition, good health and clean water. And how the child develops during the period sets the stage for later success in school and the character of adolescence and adulthood.

McCain and Mustard, in the state of the world’s children (2001) asserted that the rights of children and the cause of human development are unassailable reasons for investing in early childhood. According to them, the neurosciences provide another rationale that is hard to refute as they demonstrate the influence of the first three years on the rest of a child’s life. In addition, there are compelling economic arguments that there are increased productivity over a lifetime and a better standard of living when the child becomes an adult, later cost savings in remedial education and health care and rehabilitation services and higher earnings for parents and care givers who are free to enter the labour force.

Socially, early education or intervention helps to reduce the social and economic disparities and gender inequalities that divide a society and contributes to those traditionally excluded. Politically, a Country’s position in the global economic depends on the competencies are set early in life before child is three years old.

An adult citizen grows out of a young child. This young child should therefore be well care for and developed as a foundation for the future adult citizen. The “catch them young” concept is not just an empty cliché but one pregnant with relevant implications for the present and the future of both the child and the society. The deep “rootedness” of this concept, according to inyang – Abia (2005) has long been realized and practicalized by the early philosophers and renowned educators all over the world. Among the educational theorists and practitioners who creatively developed and maximally utilized the import of early childhood education were Dewey (1859 - 1952), Fredrick Froebel (1782 - 1852), Rousseau (1712 - 1778), Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952), Comenus (1592 - 1670), Pestalozzi (1746 - 1827) among numerous others. They had long realized that those talents knowledge, skills and values properly developed at childhood live with the person throughout his or her lifetime.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To develop a young child is to develop a society and ultimately a nation. This is embedded in the definition of education by Abad and Fenoy earlier given. The implication is that any nation that wants to be developed will have a worthwhile system of education for her citizens. Nigeria has well articulated policy on education. The policy contains levels of education system, beginning with early childhood/pre-primary education. Developmentally, there are four editions 1977, 1981, 1998 and 2004. Each edition is more enriched than the former. For instance, the 2004 edition contained policy on the 0 – 3 years old children which was omitted in that of 1998. However, the question is what is the state of early childhood pre-primary education now at the 50th year anniversary of Nigeria as a nation and how can the situation be improved for worthwhile development for 2020 and beyond?

CHALLENGES FACING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Observations confirmed by research findings for instance, Maduewesi (2002) have shown that early childhood education in Nigeria has a number of problems that needs to be overcome so that the early education, care and development of child can be meaningful and result – oriented for the nation as a whole. Nigeria has lofty policies but the problem lies with the implementation. These problems lie with the establishment of early childhood/pre-primary (nursery) schools, curriculum, mode of curriculum delivery, monitoring and evaluation and teacher.

ESTABLISHMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD/PRE-PRIMARY (NURSERY) SCHOOLS

The greater number of nursery, crèche and kindergarten schools are run by private individuals. These individuals manage and control the schools. According to Maduewesi (1999) nursery school level of education receives from government only lip service. Chukwu (2000) found out that generally no involvement of government was recorded in a study on the extent to which government was involved in the running of the nursery schools. Many of the individual proprietors and proprietresses do not have any basic knowledge of early childhood education hence poor rearing and stimulation practices, poor nutritional habits, poor quality day care centres and learning environments, inadequate physical/teaching aids, toys and instructional materials are observed.

The situation can be improved by the government establishing early childhood/pre-primary schools/settings, regulating and controlling the operations of the schools as proposed in the National policy, by the appropriate level of government reviewing and enforcing the educational laws that relate to the establishment of nursery schools to ensure that schools opened are well run. It is when the schools are rightly run that the citizen can be empowered to develop the nation.

CURRICULUM

Curriculum refers to a programme of activities which the school offers to learners. The aspects of knowledge, skills, good values and attitudes or moral behavior are contained in the curriculum. The curriculum must promote all-round growth cognitive, affective and psychomotor. This is to ensure that a 'whole' child is produced a child who is physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially and morally developed. This child is well equipped as an adult citizen to contribute to national development.

Government has made appreciable efforts in the area of curriculum development. Pre-primary school curriculum Guidelines, Early Child Care Development and Education (ECCDE) curriculum and the most recent National Early childhood curriculum for Ages 0 – 5years have been produced. However, they are not available, therefore not used in many pre-primary schools as observed by Chukwu (2000) and Ibiem (2010). According to Offorma (1994) and Rufai (2002), the general purpose of curriculum, its planning, development and implementation is to design programmes of education for a society which can foster its ideas and values and lead to maximum attainment of its social, economic, political and other needs. When diverse curricular are used, it becomes difficult to ensure that minimum standards are attained for national development.

To improve the situation, government should make available copies of the curriculum in the established schools. It is not enough to provide the curriculum but also to enforce the use. Efforts will be made to stop the use of diverse curriculum so that attainment of minimum standards is possible. In general, curriculum planners according to Okekeoti (2005), in Nkokelonye and Chukwu (2006) should plan curriculum which emphasizes love, tolerance, team spirit and cooperation for Day care centres, Nursery and Kindergarten schools. These qualities are necessary for national development.

MODE OF CURRICULUM DELIVERY

It is stipulated in the National Policy of Education (FRN 2004) that the method of teaching at the Early childhood/pre-primary Education level shall be through play and medium of instruction principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community. Both stipulations are implemented to a little extent (Chukwu 2000). This suggests that measures are inadequate for checking compliance to this aspect of the policy. Play is important to young children and as they play they learn. Play is communication and expression, combining thought and action, giving satisfaction and a feeling of achievement. Play helps children develop physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. The use of mother-tongue or language of the immediate community makes possible establishment of basic language structure and development on which basis other languages can be built. Language, sign, oral or written, as a vehicle of communication is very important in national development. It is through language that people young and old interact, acquire knowledge and experiences. These, they use for personal, societal and national development.

Government should enforce both the use of play in teaching and the use of the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community in instruction. The head teacher who is the internal supervisor should also help in enforcing these stipulations.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation constitute problem in the implementation of early childhood/pre-primary education. According to Maduewesi (2002), monitoring and evaluation are grossly inadequate due to lack of funds which prevents regular and effective monitoring. It is a common observation that after the first inspection for approval of a pre-school establishment no other inspection is carried out.

To avert the situation government should live up to her responsibilities of proposing to supervise and control the quality of such institutions as contained in the National Policy on Education. Ministeries of education will make regular inspection to ensure maintenance of high standards.

TEACHER

Government proposed to make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education. This is a new development in the colleges of Education. Meanwhile, there are unqualified teachers in the pre-schools. The teacher is the mover of learning. He facilitates learning like the saying that one can only take a horse to the stream but cannot force it to drink, the child can be taken to school to learn but cannot be force to learn except the teacher is well trained and knowledgeable of curriculum content and of child development and can apply appropriate methods and strategies to promote all-round development of the learners to enable them contribute to national development. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) accordingly noted that the future of any nation depends on the quality of its educational system while the quality of any educational system depends on the quality of its teachers.

Teachers, to be capable of teaching for understanding require careful and special preparation. Government should support the training of pre-school teachers/caregivers to upgrade their knowledge and skills on current early childhood education. Teachers should through in-service training acquire both knowledge and skills through institutes of Education, faculty of Education.

Government should grant teachers study leave with pay to motivate them in their efforts to produce children for national development.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian's adoption of education as a tool for national development makes it imperative that education should start early in life at the early childhood/pre-primary education level when brain development is rapid and the child learns fast. The establishment of the pre-school settings, its control and operation require full involvement of government. The curriculum, teachers and other resources that facilitate learning must be qualitative and monitored from time to time so that the product will be appropriately developed in order to contribute to national development.

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