



Pre-Primary Education in Nigeria: Policy Implementation and Problems

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ABSTRACT. Early childhood 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.

Key Words: Early childhood education, policy implementation

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 early-childhood or pre-school education programmes of various sorts for children below the official school-going age (usually six 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 early childhood 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, 1968). Some contend that early childhood 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 (Reissman, 1962). Furthermore, some leading scholars in early childhood education have doubted the wisdom in exposing young children very early to formal education (Elkind, 1986; Marcon, 2002; Weikart, 2000; & Zigler, 1987), 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, Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn (1995) 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 (1968) have persuasively argued, however, 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 (See Baker 1973; Featherstone, 1986; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips & Dawson, 2005; Jersild, Telford and Sawrey, 1975; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003).

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Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

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. The demand for nursery education was, however, very low until recent times. A study of the provision for nursery education in Lagos, by Makinwa – Adebusoye in 1981, for instance, showed that only 7.7% out of the 948 parents in her study sent their children to either a nursery school or a group care centre. A similar study by Orebanjo in the same year showed that half the working mothers in Ile-Ife which by then was a semi-urban settlement, preferred keeping their children with members of the extended family for child care to sending them to day care centres or nursery schools (Orebanjo, 1981).

The results of these studies would imply that parents did not value pre-school education by that period. This was not so, however, as Nigerian educational administrators, policy makers as the then military government of Nigeria had realised the need for it in the country and gave it official recognition in the National Policy on Education in 1977.

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 prior to 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, artistic 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.

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 unprecedented 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 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. 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. What is in vogue now is for these establishments to operate as nursery schools for two years or a bit more and subsequently apply for licence to operate as both nursery and primary schools. Most of them accept children aged two into their nursery sections who later transit to the primary sections of the same establishments at the age of five or even less. The number of children in these institutions varies widely from one or two in the newly established ones to over 300 in the older ones. 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. A study of one of such institutions in Ile-Ife by this author revealed that it started as a nursery school with only two children in 1995. In 1996 the number increased to 5 and in 1997, when it was approved to operate as a nursery school, it had 54 children and six teachers. The institution sought and was granted approval to operate as a nursery and primary school in 1999 with a total of 105 children and 12 teaching and non-teaching staff. By the end of the school year in 2004 the number of children had increased to 280 with 24 teachers and eight non-teaching staff.

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-fledged nursery and primary schools with their own building and premises. The physical structures vary widely in terms of quality and aesthetics from one establishment to another. So do the facilities and equipment.

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, nursery rhymes, colouring and story time and, in some cases, rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. The emphasis of most is 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.

DISCUSSION

In a situation where virtually all provision for early childhood or pre-primary education is made by private individuals and groups for mainly commercial purposes, there are bound to be some shortcomings in the implementation of the policy on nursery education and problems in the realization of the objectives of such a policy. Much of the shortcoming in the implementation of the national policy on pre-primary education hinges on the failure of the Federal Government to put into effect most of the measures it stated in the *National Policy on Education* aimed at ensuring that the policy objectives are achieved.

Of all the measures the Federal Government undertook to take in order to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of pre-primary education, the only one it effectively accomplished is the granting of permission for private effort in the provision of pre-primary 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 any public or private teacher training institution in the country for the production of specialist teachers in early childhood education. Even if any institution runs a programme for producing such teachers, it is doubtful if it can attract many clients, as neither the Federal nor any state government has established any 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.

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 (Federal Republic of Nigeria; 1998). 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 who 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 priorities of parents in order to remain in business. As far as the use of the 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 local 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 that knowledge of the language conveys on such children in the primary and subsequent levels of the Nigerian educational system. The ease with which children require and speak English language is one of most important criteria parents use to assess the quality of pre-primary institutions in the country.

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 the play method or any other type of learning activity to inculcate social norms in preschool children as advocated in the policy document.

State Ministry of Education officials are, in principle, supposed to visit and inspect the physical plant, 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 any type of location, making use of any type of facility.

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 facilities ranging from good to very poor ones with a preponderance of poor ones. The same is true in regard to teachers in 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 to children. Moreover, as there is no standard curriculum to guide the activities of these teachers, 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 (1968). 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.

It should be noted, however, that this expansion in pre-school education facilities takes place mainly in urban and semi-urban areas of the country. The rate of expansion differs, however, from state to state. The rural areas are but little affected mainly because of lack of market for proprietors. Any such schools that exist in rural areas are likely to be unregistered and substandard, charging such fees as interested parents can afford. This disparity in both the spatial distribution and quality of pre-primary education institutions in urban and rural areas will with time, further widen the educational gap between them. A welcome development in this regard is the recent initiative on early child care undertaken by the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) in collaboration with the federal, state and local communities. This initiative has led to establishment of 2,045 community-based and low cost early childcare facilities in rural and poor urban areas for 75,000 children in ten selected states (Okoro, 2004). However, this according to the then Federal Minister of Education is but a drop in the ocean compared with the needs of more than 20 million pre-school-age children in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2001).

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. 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.

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.

CONCLUSION

Available evidence suggests that early childhood education has a positive influence on educational development of children in later life and some writers on early childhood 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 early childhood 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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