



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA; POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

Early childhood education represents the foundational stage of a child's holistic development and serves as a critical pillar of the Nigerian educational system. It is formally recognised in the National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2012), which outlines the objectives, standards and implementation guidelines for the effective delivery of pre-primary education across the country. In line with this policy, government efforts are complemented by strong encouragement of private sector participation in the provision and management of early childhood education services. This article critically examines the extent to which the provisions of the National Policy on Education for early childhood education have been implemented in Nigeria. Specifically, the study highlights the core purposes of early childhood education, assesses the achievements recorded since the adoption of the policy, and identifies persistent challenges confronting effective implementation, including issues related to access, quality assurance, funding, infrastructure and teacher preparation. The paper further analyses the implications of these challenges for children's early learning outcomes and long-term educational development. Based on the findings of the review, practical and policy-oriented recommendations are proposed to strengthen regulatory frameworks, improve professional training for early childhood educators, enhance monitoring mechanisms and promote equitable access to quality early childhood education. The article concludes that sustained government commitment and strategic public-private collaboration are essential for achieving the goals of early childhood education in Nigeria and for ensuring a strong foundation for lifelong learning and national development.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Nigeria National Education Policy Implementation, Nigeria Early Childhood.



Introduction

In every modern society it is believed that education is the key to national development and there is a need to maintain every level of education especially the pre-primary stage, because it is the bedrock upon which all other educational levels build. Once a child misses that early stage it is usually difficult for the learner to get back to the basics. Pre-primary education is a common practice in most societies; they make provision for early childhood education programs of various types for children below the official school age (usually 6 years) mainly to prepare them for the rigors of primary education and beyond.

It should be noted that not everyone is in support of early childhood education. Robinson and Robinson (1968) hold the view that young children are not mature enough to learn complex task or skills that are required of them in the pre-school programs. They also argue that the love and warmth of a mother is more important than any educational program. On the other hand, some research evidence shows that early childhood education has a positive influence in children's affective, conceptual and social development in later years (Baker 1973; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips and Dawson 2005; Rolnick and Grunewald 2003).

Despite the different views on early childhood education by scholars, the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) stipulates that it should be included in mainstream education. Formal education begins from pre-primary education as provided in day-care centers and nursery schools to children aged 3 through 5 years. It is enriched by the informal traditional upbringing given to children from 0 through 3 years which makes them ready for school. Although the government is not directly involved in the establishment of daycare centers and nursery schools, it maintains oversight for the:

Provision and distribution of policy guidelines for the establishment and management of pre-primary institutions;

- i. Production and development of appropriate national curriculum and textbook in Nigerian languages;
- ii. Approval of relevant supplementary reading materials and teacher's/instructions' manual;
- iii. Provision and approval of appropriate certification of work done and training received.

Despite all these the National Policy appears to face some challenges in its implementation and there is need for revisiting these program provisions.

Early Childhood Education

Pre-primary education is the education given to younger learners before the age of entering primary

education (6 years). Early childhood education or pre-primary education is defined by the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) as education given educational settings for children aged 3 through 5 years in preparing their entry into primary school. It includes "ota akara" popularly named in some parts of the country, the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten. These types of education settings are currently provided by private entrepreneurs. Early childhood education can be traced to the efforts of prominent European education experts like: John Amos Comenius (1590-1690), J. J. Rousseau (1782 – 1788), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1748-1827) and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1751). These experts championed the right of children to early education. Many educationist and scholars including Maduewesi (1992) and Fafunwa (1967) support and advocate for the views held by these earlier educators that there is need for good early childhood education to help students develop their full potentials.



The first pre-primary education was founded in 1816 by Robert Owen. The early experts in childhood education were anxious to see the children of the rich and the poor have the opportunity and privilege to be educated. 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 in Nigeria until recently. A study for the provision of nursery education in Lagos conducted by Makinwa–Adebusoye (1981) showed that only 7.7% out of 948 parents send their children to nursery education or a group care center. In a similar study conducted by Orebanjo (1981) showed that working mothers in Ile-Ife which is a semi-urban area, prefer keeping their children with members of the extended family for childcare rather than sending them to day care centers or nursery schools. This invariably showed that parents at that time did not value pre-primary education. Consequently, the need arose for educational administrators, educational planners, policy makers, as the then military governments of Nigeria realized the need for pre-primary education in the country and gave official recognition to it in the National Policy on Education (1977) and revised 1981, 1998; subsequently revised again under elected civilian governments in 2004, 2007, and 2012. The operational objectives of pre-primary education as stated in the National Policy of Education (FRN 2012) include:

- i. Effecting a smooth transmission 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;
- ii. Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc;

- iii. Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit; vi. Inculcating social norms; vii. Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and viii. Teaching rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc. through play.

Policy Guidelines for Implementation

As stated in the NPE (2012) the implementation guidelines state by the government in order to achieve these objectives are as follows:

- 1 To establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community and private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.
- 2 To make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood pre-primary education.
- 3 To ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will:
 - a. develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages and
 - b. produce textbooks in Nigerian languages.
- 4 To ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this, regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education. To this end the teacher, pupil ratio shall be 1:25.
- 5 Set and monitor minimum standard for early childhood centres in the country; and



- 6 Ensure full participation of government communities and teacher associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities. (FRN, 2012)

While the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) specifies the guidelines for operating pre-primary education in Nigeria; it did not specify the care and support requirements for children 0 through 3 years of age. This is a major gap that has left the operation of early childhood care and pre-primary education more in the hands of private operators without adequate guidelines or standards. The comprehensive education analysis jointly undertaken by Nigeria's federal government, United Nation Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1997 revealed the enormity of this problem and underscored the urgent need for government action to provide adequate policy provision for child health care and educational programming to enhance early childhood education. Also a pilot study of early childhood care facilities and practices by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and UNICEF as well as the Education Sector Analysis by the Federal Ministry of Education, UNESCO and other development partners such as DFID, USAID, World Bank, and JICA further paint a grim picture of the situation on the ground.

In August 2004, the NERDC with the support from UNICEF convened a meeting of experts and stakeholders in early childcare to agree on the minimum standard for operating childhood care centers in an integrated way in Nigeria. This effort resulted in the production of what is today the National Minimum Standards for Early Childcare Centers in Nigeria. Furthermore,

research evidence from many fields of study showed that the care and support received by a child in terms of good health, nutrition and psycho-social care and protection are crucial in the formation and development of intelligence, personality and social behavior. Over the years, early childcare in Nigeria has metamorphosed from a single sector approach to a multi-sector pursuit, converging interventions in health, nutrition, care, stimulation, protection, and participation of the child.

However, an analysis of the current situation indicates that, to a great extent, the Nigerian child suffers deprivation from lack of good social services in terms of poor nutrition, health care, and access to safe water and sanitation, general protection from environmental hazards and insecurity. All of these gave justification for the formulation of National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria (IECD), which was officially launched in October 2007. This provided early childhood care and development in Nigeria to adopt an integrated approach for the care and support given to children aged 0 through 5 years. This is a holistic approach in which the Federal Ministry of Education collaborates with other ministries including, Health, Environment and Housing, Women Affairs, Information and Communication, Finance, Agriculture, and Water Resources, as well as the National Planning Commission to provide interventions for the cognitive, physical, social, moral, and emotional development of the child.

Purpose of Pre-Primary Education

The importance of pre-primary education cannot be overemphasized; it enables children to improve on their self-confidence since they are given opportunity to interact with their peers and adults too. Pre-primary education enhances independence and helps curb the tendency



of children that are highly aggressive during group activities. Children's interactions with their peers and adults help to widen their scope of understanding and they also gain mastery of the world around them. Pre-primary education is vital to the child, parents and society because it permits smooth transition from home to school, because it enables the child to feel free to interact with other people outside his immediate family members. The pre-primary school helps to sharpen the children's cognitive domain through learning rhymes and songs; while playing on the slides and swings help in physical development and build their muscles. Structured play with building blocks and puzzles, baby dolls, and teddy bears helps in emotional development of the children.

At the pre-primary school stage, children learn to share and co-operate with others instead of developing the selfish tendencies. Exposure to pre-primary education goes a long way to teach each child how to understand and manage their emotions. The provision of pre-primary education assists working class parents who have no relation or house help to take care of their children while they are at work. The children will be exposed to reading and writing. Statistical research has shown that children who have experienced early childhood or pre-primary programs are more likely than other children to remain in primary school and achieve good results (UNESCO, 1995).

Nigeria's National Policy on Education has made some tremendous achievements in the area of the official recognition of pre-primary level of education in the policy document and this has made it possible for the establishment of pre-primary schools in Nigeria. This has raised the status of pre-primary education to the lime light and it is no longer a backyard issue. As rightly stated by Maduwesi (1992) that recognition of the importance of pre-

primary education by the federal government has led to a new awareness of the importance of young children as a group requiring and desiring care. The government stated that it will encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education. Today private individuals have been allowed to set up nursery schools.

Critique of National Policy on Education Pre-primary Education

The goal by the government was for the National Policy on Education's development plan in pre-primary education to be distributed effectively, but there are many flaws in the plans process and implementation as discussed in this section. One area is in provision and distribution of policy guidelines for the establishment and management of pre-primary institutions. One major problem was the federal government's decision to facilitate the objectives of pre-primary education by the granting permission for private establishments of pre-primary education in the country, but not the participation of the public schools in their establishment. Presently there are many ill-equipped, substandard pre-primary schools scattered all over the country. This is as a result of lack of supervision and inspection to ensure that standard and quality are maintained. It is assumed that with the amount of money being charged by these commercial institutions that the facilities should be of high standards, but the reverse is the case. Therefore, there is a need for the federal, state, and local governments to put measures in place to ensure standards. This is because the pre-primary level is bedrock for a smooth transmission to the primary school. If the foundation is faulty it will naturally affect the superstructure. The policy ironically failed in this aspect.

Secondly, currently there is no provision in teacher education programs for specialization in early childhood education.



Unfortunately, significant provision is yet to be made in any public or private teacher training institution in Nigeria for the production of professional teachers in Early Childhood Education. Most tertiary institutions in Nigeria run teacher education B.Ed. programs that will lead the graduate to secondary or primary school teacher in subject areas other than early childhood education. Such specialists in early childhood are few and because of low wages and job insecurity associated with the private institutions, many otherwise interested teachers cannot afford to take these positions. The government to date has not effectively addressed the lack of early childhood teacher education.

Thirdly, the NPE (2012) ensures that the communication medium of early childhood institutions is principally the mother tongue (MT) or language of the immediate community (LIC) and orthography and textbooks of Nigerian languages will be produced to enhance MT and LIC. Ironically, in most of pre-primary schools in Nigeria the medium of instruction is principally the English language. As far as mother tongue instruction is concerned, Emenanjo (2001) notes the value attached to native language as regards to protection, preservation, promotion of Nigerian culture, as well as its role in promoting interethnic unity that enhances human dignity and subsequently helps promote national unity and integration in the country. This policy supported by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and justified in the National Policy on Education. The use of English language for a child to the neglect of his mother tongue has a negative influence on the child's cultural background which the policy is meant to protect. Contrary to this most parents want their children to be immersed in the English language as early as possible because of the perceived advantages and belief that knowledge of English accelerates the teaching process for

children entering the primary and other levels of the educational system. But on the other hand, evidence shows that, if children are taught with their mother tongue, they learn and develop faster intellectually, cognitively, and psychologically (Fafunwa, 1984). The policy has failed in the aspect of language implementation. The question is, does it mean that the teachers teaching those children do not speak their native language? How do we promote culture when our children cannot speak their mother tongue or language of the immediate community? This question is for the policy makers to review and address.

Fourth, the NPE ensures that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this. As a result of the government inability to regulate and control private establishment and operation of pre-primary education in the country, some schools employed teachers who are neither trained to teach nor know how to handle or relate to children. Moreover, there is no standard curriculum to guide the activities of these teachers. Such people without teaching pedagogy cause the children to lose interest in education as they are unable to present the teaching and learning experiences to children in a stimulating, sequential, and logical manner as prescribed by Robinson and Robinson (1968).

Lastly, the input of government in terms of the financial aspect in pre-primary education has been very negligible as stated by Maduwesi (2001). Pre-primary education is recognized by the federal government in the National Policy on Education, which stated that financing education shall be a collective effort responsibility of the three tiers of government, but it is found that there is no financial provision for education at the pre-primary education level. The only time the government financed education at that level



was through the Early Child Care (ECC) project of the NERDC which was founded through the collaboration of UNICEF and Federal Government of Nigeria and other international agencies prior to 2001 (Maduewesi 2001).

The Way Forward

Despite the criticism discussed above, there should be effective implementation strategies not just a policy on paper. If the pre-primary education is to benefit from this national policy there is a need for the federal, state, and local governments to ensure that the necessary educational facilities are available in both rural and urban areas. Through the various departments of the Ministries of Education implementation of effective monitoring, supervising, and inspecting of pre-primary school facilities should be mandated. If any of the private entrepreneurs does not meet the national standards or specifications for pre-primary schools, then they should be closed down and their license revoked until the owners meet the quality and standards required to maintain effective pre-primary education.

The federal government in conjunction with tertiary institutions, institute of education, and colleges of education should take positive steps to produce adequate numbers of teachers and specialists in early childhood education. This will help in the methodology and the teaching curriculum of early childhood education. In addition, each state of the federation should add a nursery section in their existing publicly funded primary schools.

Government should ensure that pre-primary school proprietors implement the policy statement on the medium of instruction in their institutions to maintain the mother tongue or language of the immediate community as the medium of instruction. To support this implementation, government should

encourage and facilitate the writing of textbooks in Nigerian languages beyond the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba). This will enhance the children's cultural identity development. Government should ensure that the main method of teaching in pre-primary institution is through Montessori play and that the curriculum of teachers training colleges is oriented to achieve this.

Conclusion

Evidence has shown that the pre-primary school has a positive influence on a child's educational background later in life; therefore, the national policy statement should be effectively implemented to achieve and maintain its objectives and goals. For this to be possible, the government should provide adequate facilities, fund, and encourage teacher training programs in early childhood education program. Additionally, there should be effective control in the establishment and approval of nursery schools. As with primary and secondary schools, approval should be given to a nursery school building plans before their constructed in order to monitor the standard of facilities. These facilities should be inspected before students are admitted into the schools and monitored and maintained to ensure quality pre-primary learning institutions.

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