

## Article

# Early childhood education: An overview

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**This paper x-rayed pre-primary education as one of the sub systems and policies in the National Policy on Education (2004) that has been neglected and is failing in Nigeria. Several years after its publication (1977) and revised four times, there is still a very yawning gap between policy formulation and implementation. Pre-primary education, which ordinarily is supposed to be the foundation stone of our education system, is wholly left in the hands of private operators to manage with no supervisory authority over them, a situation that has led to poor standards and quality. The policy on the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate community as medium of instruction; the writing of orthography of Nigerian languages for use at this level as a way of perpetuating the culture among others have all been neglected to the background. The paper observed that a policy could be good but if it is not carefully and religiously implemented, it will become a mere paper work. It was emphasized that if pre-primary education is to serve its stated purposes of making the children to have an effective smooth transition from the home to the school; prepare the child for the primary level of education; inculcate social norms; inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity; develop a sense of cooperation and team-spirit and really teach the children the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, among others. It should be well supervised, staffed, equipped, financed and coordinated. To achieve this, this policy like others in the NPE requires political will, determination, transparency, accountability and steadfastness and a close interface between policy formulation and implementation. These are benchmarks to achieve these goals.**

**Key words:** Pre-primary education, NPE, social norms, policy formulation, implementation.

## INTRODUCTION

The Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 cites early childhood education (ECE), which has to do with pre-primary education given to children between ages one and five, as an integral part of basic education. It represents the first important step in achieving the goals of education for all (EFA). Since it is the foundation for a life-long education, government is expected to be actively involved in providing it for the younger children. Evidence on ground has shown that parents, private individuals, religious bodies constitute the largest proprietorship of ECE, while government agencies provide a paltry 10%. Adenipekun (2004) notes that this abysmally low government's participation in proprietorship of day care centres and nursery schools deny the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized groups access to ECE.

## RATIONALE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Underpinning the importance attached to early childhood education which pre-primary education is an integral part, the World declaration on the survival, protection and development of children in 1990 undertook a joint commitment to make an urgent universal appeal to give every child a better future. In addition, the World Conference on education for all (EFA) and the United Nations convention on the rights of the child emphasized urgent priority to ensure access to and improve the quality of education for all children.

Adenipekun (2004) documented eight reasons given at these fora in support of the provision of affordable, quality programmes of early childcare that are community based

and which are linked with health care and nutrition as part of an integrated approach to meeting the needs of the young child. These reasons include:

- (i) From conception to six years of age, children, according to research findings, undergo rapid mental, social and physical development to the extent that by the age of six, their brains would have developed to almost the size of an adult;
- (ii) The convention on the rights of the child stipulates that children have a right to live and develop to their full capacity;
- (iii) Moral and social values postulate that through children, societies pass on values and culture from generation to generation;
- (iv) Supporting the development of the child physically and mentally leads to increased enrolment, improves performance and the society generally.
- (v) Provision of early childcare facilities and offer equal opportunities to children from both the privileged and disadvantaged homes.
- (vi) A programme in early childhood development should be used as an entry point for other developmental activities which will benefit the entire community;
- (vii) ECC (Early Child Care) projects should be linked with other developmental activities for women, nutrition, health, water and sanitation.
- (viii) There is a growing demand for better ways of caring for children through an ECC project given the advancement in science and technology which now ensures the survival of many more children, thereby increasing population growth.

The National Policy on Education for Nigeria became necessary to avoid the previous half-measured educational policies, administration and control which was a hallmark of the missionary and regional eras of education in the country. The policy is meant to put in clear perspective the educational jurisdiction of the Federal Government vis-à-vis that of the State and Local Governments. The document being the first after Nigeria's independence (enacted in 1977, but revised in 1981, 1989, 1998 and 2004), is meant to have universal effect throughout the federation. This can be seen from its content that is in its philosophical anchorage for Education' in Nigeria. As opined by Adesina (1977), "Perhaps, most significant of all, the National Policy, if considered in all its ramifications, is a charter for integrated educational system". Can we in all honesty share in the optimism or enthusiasm of the above foremost educationist in Nigeria based on our current experiences?

The Policy (2004) in Section 2, page 11 refers to "pre primary education" in this document as the education given in an educational institution to children aged 3 to 5 plus prior to their entering the primary school. The N.P.E.

identifies the responsibilities of government at this level as the promotion and training of qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of suitable curriculum and supervise and control the quality of such institutions. Sub-sections 13 of the policy enumerate the purpose of pre-primary education thus:

- (a) Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- (b) Prepare the child for the primary level of education.
- (c) Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the market, offices etc);
- (d) Inculcate social norms;
- (e) Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.
- (f) Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;
- (g) Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and
- (h) Teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc through play. Authoritatively and confidently, the Government announced its responsibilities and strategies for implementing this sub-system thus:

- (a) Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.
- (b) Make provisions in teacher education programmes for specialization in early child-hood education;
- (c) Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will:
- (d) Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages, and
- (e) Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages;
- (f) 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, and
- (e) Regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education.

With the objectives of pre-primary education in the policy and Government's intended line of action(s) as enunciated above, the question should be asked: to what extent has the Government encouraged private efforts in the provision of pre primary education in Nigeria?; what are the provisions in Teacher Training. Institutions for students who want to specialize in pre-primary education? Is the medium of instruction principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community?; Has much been done in the areas of developing orthography and producing textbooks in Nigerian languages for use in the existing pre-primary institutions?; To what extent is the government regulating and controlling the operations of pre-primary education or

even enforcing the educational laws which relate to the establishment of nursery schools?; Are the existing nursery schools in the country well equipped and staffed with the required qualified manpower?; Are there any set standards for their operations in terms of curriculum materials and teaching methodologies? So many questions but few answers. All the same, an attempt will be made to x-ray some of the issues raised above.

### **PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION: THE NEGLECTED AND FAILING POLICY**

The idea of pre-primary education was strongly influenced by the stream of thought from Pestalozzi, Froebel and Maria Montessori. 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 centres 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 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 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 "Policy", the Government committed herself extensively as to the measures she will take to achieve the stated objectives for pre-primary education. Regrettably, 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

"piggy", 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: Don't 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.

The Government’s inability to regulate and control the establishment and operations of pre-primary education in the country, not to talk of enforcing the educational laws which relate to them as provided in the NPE, has led to the indiscriminate establishment of pre-primary institutions with little or no concern for standards in infrastructure, curricula and teaching methodologies; the total effect being maladjustments on the child not only in terms of cognitive but both psychological and psychomotor wise.

The financial input of the government at the three tiers of pre-primary level of education has been very negligent. As clearly documented by Maduewesi (2001), this level of education is recognized by Government in the National Policy on Education, which also declares that financing education is the collective responsibility of all tiers of government but there is no financial provision for education before the primary school. The only time the government was visibly involved in the financing of education at this level was through the Early Child Care (ECC) project of the NERDC which was funded through a collaboration agreement between the UNICEF, the Bernard van leer foundation (BVLFF) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (Maduewesi, 2001). The funds total of \$2.9m (1987-1995) was expended in the development, production and distribution of learning instructional materials (readers, test books on child development and nutrition, curriculum guidelines; training of different caregivers, project officers, NGO’s development, production and distribution of locally available mechanical play materials as samples of replication at community level; supply items, hard and softwares; staff support and other operation costs. Do we have impacts of these at this level? The Nigeria’s Education for All plan of action (EFA, 2001) envisages that by 2010, 3% of the National budget will be spent on early childhood care and development programmes and by 2015, enrolment in early children programme will increase to 70%. How realistic are these policy statements? Is the government playing politics with the future of our children?

## **INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

As a way of having a comparative picture of the status of Early Childhood Education in other countries, some countries pre-primary education system will be examined below. In Britain, funding of nursery education is through subsidy or outright funding; Finland with National child Care Policy, the National Government picks the cost of

day care centres (43%) the municipalities (39%) and the users (14%) respectively (Ojala, 1989). In Belgium, care and education of the under three is free of charge except for meals and child minder which are exempted from taxes.

In New Zealand, for every eight out of nine children of primary school age are catered for by the State schools, the State makes no direct provisions for the education of children under five. It does, however, assist tow voluntary organizations to provide pre-school centres for children aged three and four (and a very small number under three and over five). A few independent private kindergartens and day-care centres also operate, subject to prescribed standard covering buildings, equipment and supervision.

The theories of education that have grown up around nursery schools have been widely accepted in America. Copious literature indicate that apart from local and state governments that support public education including nursery and kindergarten schools, the Federal government in America recognizes the importance of these pre-primary schools. This it demonstrated by housing some of them in public buildings. This has established a precedent for making nursery schools an integral part of the public school system.

In Japan, over seventy percent of Japanese children attend Kindergartens or pre-schools. These schools are indirectly under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Education in the sense that they supervise them though largely owned by private individual/bodies.

Pre-primary education in Russia, made up of nursery (Yasli) and Kindergarten schools (detski sad) are established to fulfill political obligations to the party. Kindergarten education is not compulsory and it is mainly run by factories, industries, collective farms or local enterprises in subordination to the Ministry of Education (Nwadiani, 1996).

The Ghanaian educational system has provision for pre-primary education. Here, pre-primary education is very much in vogue. Though, the Ghanaian government is not directly involved, there are organizations which sponsor pre-primary schools and they include the Ghana Education Service, Local authorities, religious bodies and parent’s co-operatives.

In Cameroon, primary education is sub-divided into nursery and primary education respectively. The nursery schools are run on the basis of fifty-fifty relationship between public (government and private nursery schools).

In Kenya, over 80% on pre-primary institutions are being run and financed by private groups and individuals (Riak et al., 1989). The local government through the local authorities has only been involved in the provision of professional advice through inspection, supervisions, curriculum development and the training and employment of teachers.

Recently in Nigeria however, some primary schools within

the local government(s) have started to attach nursery schools to the existing primary schools. Is this an attempt by the government to get involved in pre-primary education?

## THE WAY FORWARD

While the axiom or saying that, "if we fail to plan, we plan to fail" is a truism, it should be emphasized also that merely having a good plan policy without effective and efficient implementation strategies, can be said to be mere paperizing and planning to fail from the first stage of such policy.

Psychologist who have studied the effects of nursery school education upon children have all agreed that a nursery school education that is not properly planned, equipped and staffed, will do more harm than good to the children. If therefore, as provided in Section 2, sub-sections 13 of the National policy on Education that the purpose of pre-primary education is to effect a smooth transition of the children from home to the school; prepare the child for the primary level of education; provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work; inculcate social norms; inculcate in the child spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature; develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit; learn good habits especially good health habits, among others. Then, the government at the three tiers should implement both the letter, spirits and purpose of this policy, devoid of lip-service and adhoc implementation processes, procedures and strategies.

Pre-primary education must also provide daily nurse's inspection, medical examinations and dental care. Beside, the children at this level must be given all round development-cognitively, affectively, emotionally and psychomotor wise. Clear-cut standards for equipment, infrastructure, curricula and qualifications for teachers should be set by the government. The days of "frustrated" job seekers picking chalk and instructing at this level (or all the levels of education) should be a thing of the past. Trained specialists in pre-primary education should be motivated while institutions training teachers at this level should be expanded.

The three tiers of government through their various ministries of education and boards should establish inspectorate units for the sole purpose of supervisions and standardization of these schools. On the language policy, if the mother tongue (MT) or the language of 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

and as a way of safeguarding the culture, then, it should be practically and properly implemented. To achieve this, more language experts should be commissioned to write textbooks in Nigerian languages and to develop orthography of many more Nigerian languages instead of the suppose three dominant languages of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo (Nigerian has well over 300 languages).

It is equally necessary for the Government to encourage the spread of these schools all over the country instead of serving only the urban high and middle classes. This calls for involvement of all stakeholders-parents, local communities, voluntary organizations and the Government. The Government should enforce the educational laws governing the establishment of these institutions.

## CONCLUSION

A house that is on a faulty foundation cannot stand the test of time and space. So if the pre-primary education is the "recognized" foundation stone of our entire educational enterprise, then it should be reinforced, adequately funded, equipped, staffed and wholeheartedly implemented and not neglected.

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