

THE CRITIQUE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CROSS RIVER STATE – NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that the importance and value of education in the early years of life have been acknowledged for more than 2000 years ago. Relatively, recent factors have brought early childhood education to the forefront of public awareness. Fundamental changes in the economy, family life, public awareness, and public support have had a profound effect on early childhood education. How we approach the education and care of young children depends, to a great extent, on what we believe children are like. Programmes for preschoolers are often structured around some underlying assumptions about the nature of children. Undoubtedly, the implementation of the early Childhood Education in Cross River State as stipulated in the National Policy on Education has been marred with certain implementation problems ranging from lack of infrastructural facilities, prohibitive cost and commercialization, lack of qualified staff, overcrowded classrooms, lack of supervision, neglect of mother tongue amongst others. This paper therefore, takes a cursory look at the critique of the implementation of Early Childhood Education in Cross River State and the way forward.

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 6 years) mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools.

It should be noted that not all have agreed on the need for or effectiveness of such Early Childhood Education programmes for subsequent educational development of children. Some writers on this issue hold the view that young children are not matured enough to learn complex skills demanded by pre-school educational programmes and that the warmth or mother's love and the fostering of children's emotional security are more important than any form of educational programme (Ribinson & Robinson, 1968). Some contended 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, 1996, Marcon, 2002), 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, & Milburn (1995) cautioned that early academic gains in reading skills associated with formal education of preschoolers could have long term negative effects on achievement.

Conversely, some research evidences indicate that Early Childhood Education has positive influences in children's affective, conceptual and social development in subsequent years. (Rolnick & Grunewald 2003, Jerslid, Telford & Jawrey 1995, Essa, 1999).

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Early Childhood Education is considered by many societies and individuals to be beneficial to young children for their education in the form of nursery school-entry age. Early childhood education in the form of nursery school or pre-primary education as we know it today in Nigeria is a post-colonial development. This type of education was given official recognition by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (2004). In the policy document, provision was 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.

Therefore, in this paper, effort was geared at the critique of the implementation of early childhood education in Cross river State – Nigeria.

The policy implementation was examined pointing out its attendant problems/ shortcomings and the way forward.

The National Policy on Pre-primary Education

In the current National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004) Early Childhood Education is labeled as Pre-primary Education and is defined as the education given in an educational institutions to children prior to their entering the primary schools. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the Kindergarten. As stated in the policy document, the purpose of pre-primary education includes among others to:

- a) effect a smooth transition from home to 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 markets, 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; learn good habits, especially good health habits;
- g) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play (P.11).

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:

- a) encouraging private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education;
- b) making provision in teacher education programme for specialization in early childhood education;
- c) ensure that the medium of instruction is principally in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and to this end will;
- d) developed the orthography of many more Nigeria languages;
- e) produce text books in Nigerian languages;
- f) ensure that the main method of teaching at this level is through play.
- g) set and monitor standard for early child care centres in the country. (P. 11-12).

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

Policy Implementation: Statement of the Problem in Cross River State.

The official recognition given to pre-primary education in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) combined with a number of factors gave rise to an unprecedented expansion in the provision of child care and Pre-primary Education Institutions Nursery schools in the country. Nearly all the Pre-primary Education in Cross River State, however, are provided by private individuals. According to Akinbote, Oduolowu & Lawal (2001), despite government policy and regulation on Nursery Primary Education, more control is still needed to ensure quality in the provision. It is a known fact that many illegal, mushroom centres/institutions spring up in both urban areas and rural areas which are operated in private homes, garages, industrial areas, churches or heavy traffic routes.

Therefore, Akinbote et al (2001) therefore summarized the problems as:

1. Insufficient indoor, outdoor equipment learning facilities and play materials.
2. Lack of medical and health facilities.
3. Prohibitive cost and commercialization of education since most centres are

- established by private individuals who are out to make profit.
4. Poor staffing of lack of qualified staff. In attempt to maximize profit, the proprietor employs retired teachers who lack the pre-requisite skills to handle children. They lack the professional ability to teach and handle the children.
 5. Most schools that are situated in an accessible area are overcrowded and lack adequate infrastructural facilities such as libraries, good toilets firefighting equipment, sickbay, fans, staff room, chalkboards, etc.
 6. Poor method of teaching as children is taught mainly through rote learning.
 7. Lack of adequate supervision and support by the government and its agencies in terms of well informed, sound consistent and firm professional advice.
 8. Some centres/institutions are illegally established.
 9. Paucity and lack of affordable textbooks and culturally balanced reading materials.
 10. Some proprietors/proprietress have no educational background and they do not employ qualified and competent administrator of directors to manage the centres.

More so, Essa (1999), opined that very few of these institutions comply with government specifications on accommodation. Besides, very little provision is made for toys swings or other recreational and extracurricular activities. Orukotan and Oladipo (1992) assert that proprietors of the pre-primary schools often resort to curricular of their choices without proper supervision from the inspectorate division of the Ministry of Education.

A Critique of Policy Implementation in Cross River State

It is a truism that despite the laudable objectives and government's responsibilities towards Early Childhood Education as provided by the National Policy on Education (2004) its attainment has been a mirage. In a situation where virtually all provisions for Early Childhood or Pre-primary Education is made by private individuals or groups for mainly commercial purposes, there are bound to be some shortcomings in the implementation of the policy and problems in the realization of the objectives

of such a policy. Much of the shortcomings in the implementation of the national policy on Pre-primary Education hinge on the State government to put into effect most of the education aimed at ensuring that the policy objectives are effectively achieved is the granting of permission for private effort in the provision of Pre-Primary Education. 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 such a programme for producing such teachers, it is doubtful if it can attract many clients as neither the Federal nor Cross River State Government has established any Nursery or Pre-Primary schools where graduates of such programme can be employed. Work in private Nursery or Pre-Primary institutions would probably have no attraction to teachers because of low wages and job insecurity.

The Cross River State Government has not 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. Taking a survey of the Pre-Primary schools in Cross River State mostly in the metropolis, it was discovered that English Language was the major language used. 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 Language), as early as possible. Hence, the values of parents seem to conflict with those of the policy makers who prescribed the medium of instruction in such institutions. According to Orebanyo (1981), the ease with which children acquire and speak English Language is one of the most important criteria parents use to assess the quality of Pre-Primary institutions.

More so, Onah (1998), posited that the neglect of the mother tongue in the curriculum is a serious one as it makes learning both difficult and uninteresting to the young ones. There is no doubt that the mother tongue provided the sweet key to the child's mind as he gains the experience of his immediate surroundings through the same language. It logically follows according to Enobakhare (1971) that all meaningful childhood education ought to be done in the mother tongue.

In furtherance to these, Ejieh (2010) asserts that, the play method of teaching that is

advocated in the national policy on pre-primary education is not effectively used in most pre-primary schools as most of the teachers are not trained on the use of it. Proprietors and teachers provide their children with toys to play with mainly for recreational purposes and not for instruction. Very few, if any nursery school teacher in Cross River State have received formal training in the use of the play method or any other type of learning activity to inculcate social norms in pre-school children as advocated in the policy document. In Cross River State, it has been observed over time that the 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 school had become operational and had been paying the prescribed taxes 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 in any type of location making use of any type of facility.

Moreover, with the possible exception of a few nursery schools more specially that of the University of Calabar Staff School and crèche, the nursery schools that engage the services of qualified teachers, specially 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. Besides, the National Policy on Education (2004) 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. In the absence of such guidelines and copies of the curriculum for Pre-primary Education, proprietors and teachers resort to curricula of their choice (Okoro, 2004).

Table 1: The quality of teaching staff in selected nursery schools in Cross River State as indicated by academic qualification and language used in teaching.

Schools	Total enrollment	Quality of staff					Language used in teaching	Content in scheme of work	Most popular medium of instruction
		B.Ed	DIP	NCE Grade II	WASC/GCE	FLSC			
A	61	-	-	4	1	3	English language	Number work/experiences, counting, matching, arranger in sequence, grouping,	“ “
B	120	-	1	8	3	1	English language	“ “	“ “
C	302	-	1	6	5	2	English language	“ “	“ “
D	209	-	-	4	2	4	English language	“ “	“ “
E	41	-	-	3	1	6	English language	“ “	“ “
F	32	-	-	4	1	4	English language	“ “	Recitation
G	21	-	-	2	4	7	English language	“ “	Recitation

Source: Authors field work sampled schools Cross River State 2012

From the field work survey, as shown in the table above, it was observed that, the curriculum of a typical nursery school owned by most private individuals include alphabets, numbers, nursery rhymes, colouring and story time and, in some cases, rudiments of reading 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, poems and some school passages from various books in English Language than recreational and social activities. This is because the yardstick for assessing the quality of 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. In an 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 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 parents who see such as progress irrespective of their learning readiness.

In résumé, there is no gainsaying the fact that most of these problems hinge on the inability of the Cross River State Government to exercise effective control on the establishment and running of pre-primary schools in the state. In fact, the number of registered pre-primary schools in some local government areas more specially in the Calabar Metropolis (Calabar South and Calabar Municipal) Ikom, Ugep, Yala and Ogoja Local Government Areas is so large as compared to the number of inspectors who are supposed to regulate the establishment of, and to monitor the activities in these nursery schools location of which are not known to inspectors particular in the Northern Senatorial District. It should be however noted that the rural areas in the state 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.

The Way Forward

If pre-school age children in the country are to benefit from the hefty objectives of pre-primary education policy, there is need for the federal, state and local governments to ensure that relevant facilities are available in both rural and urban areas. 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.

Moreso, the State Government should 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 also need for the State Ministry of Education officials to enforce the regulation laid down by the Federal Ministry of Education in regard to provision of pre-primary education. Effective quality monitoring units should be set up and provided with necessary logistic support to ensure that's minimum standards are maintained in both public and private pre-primary institutions. Pre-school educational institutions that do not meet the minimum standards specified by the State Ministry of Education should be closed down, to be reopened only when the providers comply with the laid down standards. The federal government should take positive steps towards establishing programmes for producing teachers who specialize in Early Childhood Education. Approvals should be given to building plans of nursery schools before construction work starts in order to standardize some of the infrastructural facilities. The curriculum should also be accredited by the State Ministry of Education.

Moreover, teachers can achieve the objectives of early Childhood Education by incorporating topics related to the areas of concern in the daily lessons of the learners. They should employ play method while teaching. They should be friendly and take the age of the

children into consideration when organizing their materials for teaching and learning. Teachers should see themselves as the interpreters of the objectives and the custodians of the children. They should therefore serve as role models.

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 & Grumendald, 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 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.

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