

# ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT OF PRE-PRIMARY/CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: FOCUS ON CONSTRAINTS

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## ***Abstract***

*Nursery/pre-primary education as the foundation of other levels of education ought to be given adequate attention. This has not been the case in Nigeria. Lack of government participation at this level of education has brought devastating effects in the proper management of nursery education in Nigeria. Not only is the policy on the use of mother-tongue, flagrantly abused, production of textbooks in foreign languages, high teacher-pupil ratio, unqualified teaching staff, lack of adequate facilities and infrastructure, over exploitation of parents by proprietors and lack of proper control and mentoring have all combined to constitute obstacles for proper intellectual and psychological development of the Nigerian child. This paper examines the problem militating against proper management of this system of education in Nigeria. The paper recommends the establishment of government-owned nursery schools, training of the right caliber of nursery school teachers, proper monitoring through supervision of privately-owned nursery schools.*

**Key Words:** Organization, management, childhood education, constraints.

The home is fundamental in the education of the child. In the past two decades parents had enough time to carry out their traditional roles of rearing and bringing up children in the home with older relatives in the family. Today, the pattern of childhood education has changed with educated parents and those living in urban areas in paid employments spending much of their time outside home. Most of them can no longer cope with work and parental roles with each of these roles demanding full-time commitments. As a result, parental roles are transferred to nursery schools. According to Ahia (2007), throughout history children have been raised in homes by their parents and relatives. In recent years however, an increasing number of children around the world are enrolled in preschools in order to guarantee their safety while parents are away at work. Today, more young children than ever spend part of the day in preschool. This has

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seriously mitigated the effect of the role of working mothers, especially in this present time where there is scarcity of house helps and has resulted in the establishment of more nursery schools and the increasing rate of enrollment of children in pre-schools in Nigeria (Ahia, 2007).

Education is a vehicle for change. Education prepares an individual for effective and efficient living within his community (Ekemezie, 2007). This preparation starts from the nursery school in order to 'catch them young'. In recent times, the concept of pre-primary education has been expanded to include Early Childhood Care and Development Education (ECCDED) for children between 1–5 years. Lassa (1996) posited that pre-primary education incorporates kindergarten and day care practices at non-formal setting to formal nursery and primary school system. Whereas in Nigeria primary education is regarded as the foundation for other education system, the author is of the view that pre-primary education is the foundation of all other levels of education, considering the fact that it facilitates learning at the stage of the child education. Pre-primary education therefore being the basic formative age of every child should be accorded adequate attention in terms of quality and quantity for improved standards.

### **The Concept of Effective Preparation and Purpose of Nursery Education in Nigeria**

Nursery education is the stepping-stone for all other levels of education. Performance in the other levels of education depends to a large extent on the foundation laid in the pre-school level. There is therefore the need for efficient and careful planning of pre-primary education. Effective preparation means careful planning, organization and administration of any programme to achieve its objective. According to Olaitan & Akpan (2003), no institution functions without proper organization and administration. Nursery education according to Ekemezie (2007) is the education given to children in an educational institution prior to their entry into primary school. It is the education given to children between ages 3 to 5 years before primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and kindergarten (FRN, 2004). According to Encyclopedica Americana (1989:553), pre-primary education is a form of education for children of three through five years of age, prior to entry into the first elementary grade. This type of education helps to build a background of experiment of academic skills. It is the foundation on which every other form of education is built, be it primary, secondary or tertiary. It is the bedrock of every other education system. Olaitan & Akpan (2003) defined nursery education as a preparatory school which seeks and addresses itself to growth needs of children between the ages of two to five years such that they could successfully adapt to and satisfy the primary school need by the time they graduate out of the nursery school. It is specifically meant for children of preschool age and aims to achieve the objectives of the National policy on Education (FRN, 2004) in nursery education such as;

- (i) To effect a smooth transition from home to the school
- (ii) Prepare the child for primary level of education

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- (iii) Provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on farms, in the markets, or office)
- (iv) Inculcate social norms
- (v) Inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys
- (vi) Develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit
- (vii) Learn good habits especially, good health habits, and teach rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through plays.

As laudable and lofty as these objectives are, they cannot be achieved without proper implementation. No wonder the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:11-12) provided the following guidelines for proper implementation: The government is expected to;

- a) establish pre-primary section in existing public schools and encourage both community/private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education.
- b) make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood.
- c) ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community.
- d) develop the orthography of many more Nigeria languages, and.
- e) produce text-books in Nigerian languages.
- f) ensure that the main method 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.
- g) ensure full participation of government, communities and teacher associations in running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities.

The proposed plans for proper implementation of the pre-primary education are well articulated and laudable. However, there exist some discrepancies between government's initial intentions and what has so far been done. The simple fact that government is not actively involved in the management of this level of education has given rise to many problems in its implementation.

**Constraints to Effective Management of Preschool Education**

Since pre-primary schools are the foundation on which all other strata of education rest, care should be taken so that these level of education perform their functions. Lack of enforced standards at this level has had several devastating consequences which if not checked can jeopardize the entire educational system in Nigeria.

**1) Non-Uniformity**

Apart from operations in government-owned pre-primary schools, government cannot ensure and ascertain that the practice in privately owned pre-school institutions is uniform in terms of curriculum, books, methods and equipment. According to Obinaju (2003), government cannot even compare operations in these schools with the government-owned. There is so much disparity such that proprietors claim operations in their schools are better even when their knowledge of what is worthwhile is far from acceptable and recommended standard. Disparity is observed in the age of admission of children, number of hours spent in school, school subjects, quality of teaching, qualification of teachers, classroom space provision, outdoor games facilities and several other quality determinants.

**2) Private Ownership**

Most of pre-school institutions are owned by different private individuals, church and tertiary institutions hence have profit-orientation and not character moulding and transmission of formative knowledge as their aims. This level of education is not accessible and affordable to every Nigerian child because of high fees charged as a result. Despite several promises, government has not been able to establish pre-primary schools. Government has only been able to encourage private ownership and this has made access for children from the poor impossible.

**3) The Use of Mother Tongue**

The use of mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as a medium of instruction in nursery schools according to Ede (2009) is a colossal failure. The use of mother tongue policy cannot be implemented due to the importance attached to English language in Nigeria. According to Ocho (2005) & Nwangwu (2003), interactions with parents make one to believe that most, if not all parents who send their children to nursery schools do so for them to learn and speak English. It is erroneously believed that children who speak English from birth have undue advantage over those that speak mother tongue. Most nursery schools are privately-owned. Parents have the freedom to send their children to school of their choice and nursery school owners always make effort to please their clients. Government does not have the necessary wherewithal or have not deemed it necessary to enforce the mother tongue policy in nursery schools. As a result English language and not mother tongue or language of the immediate community has become more popular in nursery schools in Nigeria. The use of mother tongue according to Nwangwu (2003) is tied up with the development of orthography of many more Nigerian languages and production of textbooks in Nigerian languages. But the importance attached to English language by Nigerian parents, the multilingual nature of Nigeria and the tendency of proprietors of nursery schools to

satisfy the needs of parents who patronize them, have all constrained against the implementation of the mother-tongue policy.

**4) Exploitation**

Most parents do not trust many of the available pre-school institutions. Their lack of confidence on the ability of most of these schools to deliver forces them to 'scout for reliable schools' for their children. If accreditation were possible at this level of education, minimum academic standards would have been enforced and those unable to meet the required standards would be shut. This is not presently the case as those identified by parents as 'good schools' for their children take undue advantage of parental patronage to exploit them (Obinaju, 2003). Unreasonable levies and exorbitant fees are imposed on these parents who complain but pay all the same since they do not have alternatives.

**5) Quality of Teacher/Personnel**

Since the sole objective of establishing/opening nursery schools in Nigeria is profit making, proprietors engage all sorts of charlatans and unqualified personnel to teach in these schools. Most of those employed to teach are SSCE attempted, SSCE holders and on-the-job trainees. They do not have skills in pedagogy, yet this is a very important level in the education pyramid. The presence of unqualified teachers proves the simple fact that government has not made enough provisions for training of teachers for this level of education. This is confirmed by Ede (2007:41) when he asserted that;

One of the greatest banes of science education foundation at the nursery school level is the lack of qualified and committed teachers. Many nursery school teachers are school dropouts who themselves need to be taught. Many other teachers here are TCII and NCE holders, who teach all subjects (including science) at this level, and most of them are ill-equipped scientifically for such assignment. This issue of ensuring that play forms an important aspect of the teaching method is not being implementable since the right caliber of teachers are lacking.

**6) Infrastructure/Facilities**

The nature and quality of infrastructure in these nursery schools are not uniform but are of low standard in terms of the emotional, physical, social and psychological development of these children. Most of these nursery schools are located in the wrong places such as noisy uncondusive and inaccessible area, some in uncompleted residential buildings or village halls. They are located sometimes near main roads with attendant incessant traffic noises, rubbish dumps on nearby waste land. There is absence of large green spaces for movement, and for physical and health education, building without decoration inside, narrow passages and

darkrooms. The lack of all these is inimical to the general wellbeing and aptitudes of the children for learning.

**7) Instructional Materials/Methods of Teaching**

Instructional materials and methods according to Ekemezie (2007) imply all things provided by the teacher to the child in cause of teaching and learning and the methodology applied to make sure that the expected knowledge is passed to achieve the desired outcome. At this stage of a child, independent activities are encouraged through the provision of materials which the child can touch and play with. Children at this age learn concepts, skills and attitudes both consciously and unconsciously. As a result Osuji (2005) recommended the play method as the best for teaching children at the nursery school level. According to Osuji (2005), young species of both animals and man learn to live in society through plays. Puppies and Kittens, even when alone, jump about, somersault and catch imaginary flies in the air. Osuji (2005) concluded that play for a child is like making an instruction practical for an adult. Most proprietors of these schools are untrained in pedagogy hence do not know the usefulness of play method in teaching. Children are therefore uncared-for and unattended to, most of the time.

**8) Lack of Essential Services**

Most essential services like guidance/counseling services, transport services, clinic, library and free-meal services are not provided in most nursery schools. All these help to stimulate the learning environment of children hence when lacking, the child's learning pace may stagnate and he may suffer 'delayed milestone'.

**9) Lack of Supervision by Government**

The management/operators of these nursery schools are not properly supervised. Government agencies do little or nothing as far as supervision of nursery schools is concerned. Operators are left to their whims and caprices without adequate control. They operate anyhow and this constitutes a challenge to this important level of education in Nigeria.

**10) Lack of Accountability**

Due to inadequate control and supervision by government and their agencies as discussed above, private schools generally and nursery schools in particular have the problem of accountability. In the first place, to whom are they accountable? These who have the idea of accountability at all try to render shoddy accounts at Parents Teacher Association meetings of their schools. These meetings most often are under the direct control of school operators (proprietors). To the government who is supposed to be in direct control of education of its citizenry, it is not clear

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what account is rendered by these sets of proprietors. Where it is suggested that regular reports be sent by proprietors to government, what is the assurance that contents of the report are not compromised. According to Obaniju (2003), if government primary schools could have the effortory to operate 3 enrolments registers simultaneously for one school-one for federal inspectors, one for state inspectors and one for the day-to-day running of the school, what is the guarantee that private nursery operators will not surpass this level of dishonesty?

**11) Lack of Fulfillment of Government Promises**

Most strategies promised by government in order to achieve the objectives of pre-school education in Nigeria are mere rhetorices without any concrete steps taken to actualize them. Such policy as provision of teacher education programme for specialization in early childhood education has not been actualized. Presently, most colleges of Education and faculties of Education in Nigeria do not have departments of early childhood and care education. The policy on mother tongue has equally been flagrantly abused without qualms. English language instead of mother tongue or the language of immediate community is still being widely taught/used as a medium of instruction. Both the development of orthography and production of textbooks in Nigerian languages for this level of education are yet to be actualized, the teacher – pupil ratio of 1:25 which government specified is yet to be put into practice since nursery school proprietors/proprietresses have this insatiable desire for higher school population for them to make more profits, not minding the influence of this on child development. As was discussed above, government has failed to guarantee adequate control and supervision of nursery schools in Nigeria since it has abdicated its responsibility to create an inspectorate division that should be charged with these responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

Nursery education is a very important aspect of child education to the Nigerian society. It does not only prepare the child for easy transition to primary school, it equally affords the working class parents opportunity to worry less of what becomes of their children when they are off to work. Recognizing the position of nursery education as the foundation for all other levels of education, government should strive to do the following: establish government-owned nursery schools, subsidize the training of qualified and the right caliber of teachers in nursery education and pedagogy, ensure proper supervision and control of private-owned nursery schools, ensure adequate accountability in the areas of staff strength, population of pupils, infrastructure and facilities and the enforcement of the use of mother-tongue/language of the immediate community.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made:

- 1) Government should ensure that Colleges of Education and Faculties of Education are encouraged to introduce departments of early childhood and care development for training of nursery school teachers.
- 2) Adequate efforts should be directed at effective monitoring and supervision of both the managerial and instructional services at this level of education. An inspectorate services at this level of education should be created for this purpose.
- 3) Adequate infrastructure and facilities necessary for running of nursery schools should be provided by government and private initiatives to ensure standard and quality.
- 4) Government should make pre-primary education accessible and affordable for every Nigerian by defraying the cost through either establishing government –owned nursery schools or giving quarterly grants to privately owned schools.
- 5) The use of mother-tongue or language of immediate community should be enforced at this rung of our education ladder because people learn better, retain more and recall more if taught in the mother tongue (Ocho, 2005).
- 6) Adequate support and encouragement should be given to those who author textbooks in Nigerian language for this level of education.
- 7) Regular accountability to government by proprietors / proprietresses / managers of nursery schools should become a routine, to check standards.
- 8) One year nursery / childhood education should be made compulsory for every Nigerian child of ages between 3 – 5 years.

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