

DEVELOPING THE TALENT(S) IN THE NIGERIAN CHILD THROUGH NURSERY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Talent not developed is a talent wasted. If education is all about developing people's potentials, then it has to be early. This paper emphasizes the need to identify and start the process of developing these talents right from the nursery schools. It recommends that the goals- and general learning environment in the nursery schools should be re-aligned around life's occupations to enhance nursery education in Nigeria.

Introduction

Education cannot begin too Early

(Plato, 788)

Education is a complex, life-long process which aims at leading out of the in-born powers and potentialities of the individuals in the society and the acquisition of skills, aptitudes and competencies . necessary for self-realization and coping with life problems. This implies that:

❖ Individuals are born with certain innate qualities, so that no one could be said to be completely without any human or creative qualities --- *talents*. These individuals could, however, be or not be aware of these talents and so has to be *helped* to their utmost realizations.

❖ There are skills and qualities which the individuals need but do not have. These, they have to *learn* to further fine-tune the talents for higher productivity.

Such individuals who have identified, developed and are rightly using their talents, are the "dreams of every society, as they contribute meaningfully to her steady growth and development. It is for this reason that the society institutes the school to produce quality manpower to meet her needs. These individuals are professionals such as doctors, teachers, chemists, engineers, business administrators, accountants, security agents, lawyers, musicians, comedians, etc. Thus, the worth of the school system lies in its ability to continuously serve all its stake holders better and simultaneously remain relevant, consistent and reliable (Achuonye & Ajoku; 2003). The higher the productivity of the school-graduates, the higher the quality of the school, and the more relevant it is to the society. The society therefore feels disappointed when this expectation is not being met.

Currently in our society, there is an out-burst against low productivity level of our graduates. For instance, more patients are dying in hospitals in the hands of our doctors; houses, bridges and roads under construction are collapsing at the face of our engineers and architects; malaria is staging a comeback as a notorious killer disease {a battle fought and won some decades ago), this is also, in the face of our pharmacists and environmental scientists; and food scarcity is on the increase even with the emerging colleges of agriculture, polytechnics and universities of science and technology turning out numerous graduates of agriculture, food science and nutrition.

Though, many factors could be responsible, one clear issue is that our professionals have severe pit-falls—individuals are wrongly placed; their innate potentials lay waste while they struggle to be what their parents/guardians desire. The case here is that of putting the right peg in the wrong hole. This has led to severe unemployment and hike in crime rate. Expatriates are still preferred in our industries while our graduates are either out rightly rejected abroad or sent back to classrooms.

Unfortunately, the situation seems to be getting worse every day even with the huge budget allocations and the emerging of more schools. Why is this so? Tin's paper therefore, is of the opinion that we re-examine our educational foundations. We need to take a closer look at our early childhood educationthe *Nursery level*. How appropriate is it? If education is all about producing quality manpower, does the training of our professionals start at the nursery, as suggested by Plato in the above quotation? Why must it start at the nursery level, and how can that be achieved?

Our Nursery Education Today

Nursery education is the pre-primary education given to children between the ages of 3 and 6 years (Anekwe & Ifeakor, 2004). This level is suffering obvious neglect from planning to implementation. For instance, there is clear cut representation of the nursery education in our educational system, whether called 6:3:3:4 system (six years of primary; three years of junior secondary; three years of senior secondary; and four years of tertiary education); or 9:3:4 system (nine years of basic education which is six years of primary and three years of junior secondary; and then three years of senior secondary; and four years of tertiary education). These indicate that education in our country actually begins at the primary level; hence the term- *pre-school*. This further explains why government after government could make primary education free and compulsory while the nursery level remains optional and completely sponsored by parents and guardians.

In fact, it is not an over statement to say that Nigerian government is not interested in Nursery education. For instance, section 2 of the National Policy on education (1998) reveals that this level is completely put in the hands of private individuals whose backgrounds are not specified. This has, no doubt, led to novices; business men and women; even illiterates operating nursery schools. This is obvious in their gross misuse of everything, including the ridiculous indiscriminate use of the term; '*Montessori*' on their sign-posts, deceiving uninformed parents and wasting the precious time of innocent babies. If one may ask, what kind of foundation do we expect from these people? Where are we going from here? However, in the recent time, as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004), the existing public schools are encouraged to also establish pre-primary sections. Though this is a step in the right direction, the fear still remains that of implementation which has constantly been the major killer of our lofty plans.

Worsening the situation further is the fact that the government denies the nursery level any form of financial assistance. Instead, all forms of outrageous levies are placed on the proprietors who in turn put the school fees too high for poor families to enroll their children. The government claims to play only a supervisory role which in itself is poorly done. Most of the so called supervisors are very ignorant of the practices in an ideal classroom, not to talk of the nursery class. They look out for trivial issues and at the presence of any form of 'settlement'⁷, a colourful report is written.

Furthermore, in the National Policy on Education (2004: II), shows that the purpose of Nursery Education is to:

- 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 inquiry 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.
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- h) teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc through plays.

These are more or less trivial issues. The 'leading out of the in-born powers and potentials of the individuals' are not emphasized; yet this is supposed to be the bed rock of any meaningful education. Creativity is simply mentioned in passing; no wonder the implementation itself is so poor. This can be observed in the gross misunderstanding of terms such as 'toys' and 'play'. The learning environment is littered with 'toys' - mere dolls, teddies, and rattles; while play is just play: purposeless singing of songs and rhymes, jumping up and down slides, swings, merry-go rounds, rocking-horses, etc. At the best, are endless recitations of numbers, alphabets and the thirty-six states with their capitals.

These per se may not be entirely wrong, but where the minor becomes the major or vice verse, then something is definitely wrong. This is a case of misplacement of priorities. Most successful educational systems of the world such as America, and Britain nurture talents (Achuonye, 2003). Much effort is mobilized to ensure that the potentials of their citizens are fully harnessed. This consistently keeps these countries at the top because their geniuses in various aspects of life are carefully identified and properly motivated. Even countries like Japan, China, and Malaysia, who earlier were technologically

backward are now advancing, all because they learnt the secret of the world superpowers and realigned their educational system to talent identification and development to ensure that the right person is in the right place.

Identifying and Developing Talents

Talent development is a vital process which must start early in life. Every child has a talent; some even have more than one. Unless a talent is identified, its developmental process cannot start. Unfortunately, a talent not developed is a talent wasted. The earlier a talent is identified and subsequently developed the better it is to the individual and the society. Stressing on this, Plato (788) stated that:

Anyone who would be good at anything must practice that thing from his youth upwards, both in sport and earnest, in its several branches: for example, he who is to be a good builder, should play at building children's houses; he who is to be a good husbandman, at tilling the ground; and those who have the care of their education should provide them when young with mimic tools. They should learn before hand the knowledge which they will afterwards require for their art. For example, the future carpenter should learn to measure or apply the line in play; and the future warrior should learn riding, or some other exercise, for amusement, and the teacher should endeavour to direct the children's inclinations and pleasures by the help of amusements, to their final aim in life. The most important part of education is right training in the nursery. The soul of the child in his play should be guided by the love of that sort of excellence in which when he grows up to manhood he will have to be perfected. (Rusk, 1976: 32-33).

This implies that talent identification and development should commence in earnest at the early childhood education.

Why at the Nursery Level?

Nursery pupils are in the very sensitive periods for early learning and rapid intellectual development. It is easier for a child to learn a particular skill during this period than at any other time in his/her life. Thus, in the Absorbent Mind, Montessori (1870-1952) wrote:

The most important period of life is not the age of university studies, but the first on the period from birth to the age of six. For that is the time when man's intelligence itself, his greatest implement is being formed. But not only his intelligence; the full totality of his psychic powers...At no other age has the child greater need of intelligent help, and any obstacle that impede his creative work will lessen the chance he has of achieving perfection. (Wolf, 1995:5).

Buttressing this, Bloom in Wolf (1995) revealed that: from conception to age 4, the individual develops 50% of his mature intelligence, from age 4-8 he develops another 30%. This would suggest that the very rapid growth of intelligence is the early years. Through manipulative materials young children at the nursery level, joyfully absorb abstract concepts which usually form stumbling blocks at the elementary level. Such materials, according to Wolf (1995), serve as touchstones in their memories for many years ... touchstones that clarify these difficult abstract terms whenever they meet them in future learning situations.

How Can this be Achieved?

To properly identify and develop the talent(s) in the Nigerian child the following conditions are imperative.

√ Make the Goals right — clear and direct

Nursery education should be compulsory to every Nigerian child so as to expose more talents. The National Policy on Nursery education should emphasize talent hunting. This goal must be clear and direct, so much that it cannot be mistaken. In fact the first part of the purpose there in section 2 of our National Policy on education should be:

- Identify the innate aptitude(s) in our children;

- Sensitize children to various professions available in the society;
- Expose children to the mimic tools and activities of various professions;
- Help children appreciate the dignity of labour.

With these types of purpose every stakeholder.... teachers, parents/guardians, administrators, supervisors, professionals, etc are focused. This, to a large extent will put to check such ugly tendencies of parents, at about the end of Senior Secondary education, forcing certain professions down the throats of their children/wards. Thus, if this type of purpose is made known to all concerned, everybody will be on the watch; and by the end of the Junior Secondary level every concerned person the child, supervisor, parents/guardian etc, would have been rest assured that this or that is the talent. The child's potentials would have been very clear to both parties. There would, then be little or no dispute over career choice. It is in the light of this that the Holy Bible commands: "*Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it*" (Proverbs, 22:6).

√ ***Create the Learning Environment—natural, complete and challenging***

It is important to note that the much abilities and capabilities embedded in children are drawn out only in a natural, non-competitive atmosphere. Apart from being secure and a happy place, such environment should grant the child freedom to learn and perfect all her natural tools for learning so that her ability will be at maximum in future learning situations (Wolf, 1995).

THE freedom here is not absolute; it is integral. This freedom is-

- not to do what they like but what they are able to do;
- the freedom needed to develop without abusing the freedom of others;

- the freedom which consists in absolute obedience to the laws of the development of his own nature.

Their increasing independence gives them a feeling of self worth and value which is of immense importance to child development - the knowledge that - 'I can do things by myself; I too can do it'. Thus, children must work individually, with freedom at tasks of their own choice.

This is typical of Montessori classrooms referred to as '***Children Houses***'. They are set up to be a comfortable and home-like for the children as possible - an environment which they can feel their own, for which they can be responsible. The children's houses all over the world provide a secure and happy environment for children, ideally suited to the fulfillment of their potentials. There is no competition. Each child relates only to his previous work, and his progress is not compared to the achievements of others. Such freedom in a classroom equipped with adequate learning materials enables the child to perfect his/her coordination; lengthens his/her span of concentration; learns to pay attention to details; and learns good working habits which he/she will draw from for a long time to come.

√ ***Employ Learning Materials—Adequate and Purposeful Varieties of Specimens and Models***

At the nursery stage, imitation is one of the strongest urges of children. They desire to mimic whatever they see adults do; tirelessly working to perfect themselves. This is a natural inclination, hence the need to provide them with such materials to engage them so much as to draw out their potentials.

Such learning materials, should therefore, not be mere toys; they should be purposefully selected or produced and used in the classroom. These materials may be specimens, models and mock-ups of real things ranging from home to professional tools. The ***home materials*** include kitchen tools (pots, frying pans, cooker, spoons, knife, etc); wardrobe items (dresses, trousers, shirts, ties, scarf, shoes with laces and buckles, polish and brushes; general cleaning materials such as soap, water, bucket' etc. These materials provide the children opportunity to practice home experiences using buttons, laces, hooks and eyes, snaps, zippers, pins, buckles, bow-ties, etc. Miniature forms of ***Professional tools*** such as medical kit, mineral box, different map puzzles, varying plant and animal puzzles, agricultural kit, language materials, arithmetical tools, model farm-house with the domestic animals, economic plants,

and the farmers, etc. Such materials help children to appreciate the dignity of labour in various life occupations early in life, as to develop interest which is further nurtured in the subsequent classes.

Other materials include the ones Montessori called *sensorial materials*, e.g. sound boxes, smelling jars, pink tower, brown stairs, red rods, colour tablets, geometric solids, swatches of different materials (wool, flannel, silk, cotton, velvet, canvas, lace), plane geometric shapes (viz. different types of triangles, different-sized rectangles, different polygons, different-sized circles, irregular four-sided figures and various figures), cylinder blocks- varying in graduated differences of depth and diameter, etc. These sensorial materials help to sharpen the senses and enable children understand the many impressions received through them. They help the child to distinguish, to categorize, and to relate new information to what he already knows.

All these materials should be as colourful as possible, reduced in size, and light enough to be handled by children. To further enhance accessibility, the materials should be arranged on low shelves. Also, sitting arrangement should not be rigid; tables and chairs should be movable, permitting flexibility.

√ **Learning strategy ----- *Guided Play and Purposeful Modeling***

To children, play is pleasurable while work is tedious and unpleasant. This is why the strategy must remain play but it should not be a mere play (Olele & Achuonye, 2004). Instead, it should be purposeful and closely guided. It could be on individual basis or in small groups but the roles should be specific and objectives clearly defined. Using the models of some professional devices, various professions should be mimicked. For instance, a medical doctor wearing a lab coat attending to a patient; a lawyer wearing a wig defends a client; a farmer wearing a straw hat cultivating in his farm, etc. To further drive this impression home, successful professionals in the various fields, within the locality, should, from time to time, come in as resource persons, to address the class on the 'what and why' of their professions. This would help create an early picture of life of work which subsequently stimulates in the children the desire to become something useful to the society.

√ **Teachers — *Facilitators of Learning***

In this kind of learning environment, the focus is the learners; therefore the teacher should be more of a supervisor, a facilitator of learning, such was referred to as 'directress' by Montessori. Such a person should be an intelligent observer; a good motivator; providing stimulating and challenging environment for the children; responding to their individual needs; allowing each child to progress at his/her own pace and making it possible for them to make their own discoveries. This role is very vital as the individual should possess patience, a sense of humour, and adequate interests to bring perspective to their work and enhance the children's lives.

However, these teachers must avoid situations that hinder creativity, such as were outlined by Amabile (1990) in Matlin (1994) as follows:-

- " Obvious watching of children while at work
- Offering of rewards for an achieved task
- Providing prizes for competition
- Restricting choices about how children can express their creativity.

The teacher should ensure active involvement of every child, and ensure that the learning materials are self-correctional so much that satisfaction is well derived in one's ability to accomplish a task successfully. This would eliminate discouragements and expose the much needed potentials.

Conclusion

This paper has emphasized the need to make nursery education more pragmatic so that the child's education is aligned early enough with his/her talent(s) through activities centered on life's occupations. As in the words of Piaget (1964),

The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done -men who are creative, inventive and discoverers. The second...is to form minds which can be critical, can verify and not accept everything they are

offered... we need pupils who are active, who learn early to find out by themselves... who learn early to tell what is verifiable. (Nnadozie & Nwogbo; 2004).

The child, they say is the father of man. This implies that the man we expect tomorrow is the child we see today. And unless the innate potentials of this child are fully sensitized and developed, the man we shall see tomorrow will be very deficient, less productive, less self sufficient, less self reliant and less self sustaining. Hence, the education the child receives today, will shape his understanding and vision of life, and this will in turn enable him to play a significant role in the making of himself and in the development of his fatherland, particularly in this era of unprecedented technological explosion.

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