

REPOSITIONING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THE CHILDREN'S THEATRE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Education in the 21st century is a basic need. Interestingly many people perceive education as a right of both children and adults. As regards the issue of quality delivery, the foundation level of education is crucial anywhere in the world. In Nigeria, the educational system has witnessed a catalogue of changes in policies and programmes. Some of the changes have appeared to a number of people as desirable while one continues to wonder why some of the other changes were ever initiated. This has resulted in a series of policy somersaults and disruption of academic calendars at all levels of learning throughout the country. Worse hit by all these is the pre-primary level of education where there is no visible government involvement whether in supervision, inspection or funding. It is against this background the paper explores the potentiality of children's theatre in repositioning early childhood education in Nigeria. In doing this, it deploys the analytical methodology to explain issues and raise some vital suggestions on how to make that level of education work for better quality delivery. The paper concludes that since children's theatre is both recreational and educational, it should be better placed to reinforce all others aspects of preschool's curriculum as well as make teaching and learning fun for both the teachers and pupils at the pre-primary education level in Nigeria.

Keywords: children's theatre, preschoolers, NPE, early childhood education facilities, TIE,

INTRODUCTION

A child is a young human being between birth and puberty; a son or daughter of human parents (Encarta, 2009). It follows therefore that whatever a child experiences between birth and puberty constitute his/her childhood. Naturally too, we have early childhood (birth to about 5 years), mid childhood (6 to about 11 years) and late childhood (12 to about 18 years) phases of children's growth and development. Scientists agree that the early childhood stage of life is crucial to the all round development of any human being. In this regard, Awake! (2004) asserts that "studies indicate that early childhood is a critical time for developing the brain functions necessary to handle information, express emotions normally, and become proficient in language". The form of education given to a child at this phase of development is called the early childhood/preschool/pre-primary education.

At this stage, a child's health, intellect, personality, character, emotional stability, to mention a few, is moulded. Hence, the necessity of adopting adequate/appropriate teaching methods in teaching children in the first five years of life is incontrovertible. Like young plants, children develop and thrive when nurtured with regular, loving attention. Water and sunlight nourish a young plant and stimulate healthy and stable growth. By the same token, a child who is showered with verbal and physical expressions of love/training would enjoy stable mental and emotional growth. Some child-

development scholars have identified and associated this type of early childhood training with counselling. Perhaps, this is because teaching involves some level of counselling. In fact, they conceptualize counselling as a process in which one person (a teacher or a childminder or even a parent) assist another person (a child) in a person-to-person or face-to-face encounter (Eduwen, 1994; Aluede, McEachern and Kenny, 2005). They further posit that this assistance may take many forms: it may be vocational, social, recreational, emotional and/or moral. Whatever form it takes, the idea of “play” is central when it comes to early childhood training. This is probably why the National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria stressed the deployment of the “play” concept in the passing of instructions to preschoolers/pupils at the pre-primary level of education. It recommends that early childhood education facility providers must ensure that the main method of teaching at this level should be through play (2004).

Unfortunately, there is no organized pre-primary education sector in Nigeria and the few agencies/organizations that currently run pre-primary education facilities operate without putting the tender age of the children into consideration. The children are constantly exposed to materials that are way beyond their abilities and capabilities. To worsen the issue the government does not even play the critical supervisory role it ought to play at this level of education. In this regard, the Communiqué of the National Forum for Policy Development Workshop on National Education Reforms (2007) notes that: At this level, there is no government involvement in supervision and funding. Children aged between 2 and 5 years who should be in school at the pre-primary level are about sixteen (16) million but only 1 million are in school, representing 6.25%.

Though the primary, post primary and tertiary levels of education receive some attention, the negative rub off from the pre-primary level which is the foundation tend to adversely affect learning activities at these other higher levels of education. Besides, the inconsistencies in educational policies and programmes have also taken its toll on the educational infrastructure in Nigeria. This may have informed the lamentation of Aluede (2006) that the many changes in educational policies in Nigeria are products of confusion. There is therefore, a high level of uncertainties which is beclouding meaningful planning in Nigeria’s educational system. This could be very dangerous, particularly as the future of Nigeria and Nigerians will ultimately be determined by the level of education its nationals have acquired. However, this paper is primarily concerned with the foundation level of education which is usually called the pre- primary or early childhood education sector in Nigeria. It adopts the analytical approach to examine the activities in this sector vis-a-vis government’s nonchalance and canvasses the need to reposition the sector using the children’s theatre approach. The paper concludes that such an option would not only supplement existing curriculum to make that level of education work for better quality delivery, it would make teaching and learning pleasurable and entertaining for both the teachers and the children . As a way of furthering this discussion, it is germane that we examine the nature and purpose of early childhood education in Nigeria.

Early Childhood Education in Nigeria: Basis and Matters Arising

Early childhood/pre-primary education is designed for preschoolers or those children who are not up to primary school age in Nigeria. Asaya, Ehigie and Igbinoehene (2006) assert that it is the education which is given in an educational institution to children aged 2 to 5 plus prior to their entering the primary school. Although this assertion is, to a great extent, consistent with that of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria, some pre-primary education facility providers admit less than 6-month old children into their schools. In fact, there are basically three forms of pre-primary education in the Nigerian context. These are: the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten (NPE, 2004). It may not be superfluous if we briefly examine them.

The Crèche: This is a preschool facility which provides care and other support services for tender children while their parents or guardians are at work. It also designates “a place where small children are looked after while their parents are working or busy with other tasks” (Encarta, 2009). In many areas in Nigeria, the typical working hours are from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm or 8:00am to 2:00 pm, and preschoolers are taken care of during these periods at the crèche depending on the needs of the parents

or the services and policies of the preschool facility providers. Most of the crèches in Nigeria are run by churches, consortia and other private individuals who seldom employ specialist teachers in early childhood education but are all out to make profit.

The Nursery: This is a pre kindergarten school for children between the ages of three and five, staffed wholly by trained preschool teachers who encourage and supervise educational play rather than simply providing childcare. Asaya, Ehigie and Igbinoghene (2006) affirm that nursery schools are generally credited with being more educational than childcare centres. In Nigerian, virtually all the nursery schools are privately owned and run by interested individuals or business concerns whose tuition fees are prohibitively expensive. There is no government or publicly run nursery programmes to cater for the larger populace which do not belong to the upper-income families bracket. Besides, these preschool facilities operate at the whims and caprices of the owners who may not be abreast with best global practices in that level of education. More often than not children are coerced into learning concepts well beyond their age and capacities in these nursery schools all in the name to grow intelligent pupils.

The Kindergarten: This type of preschool in Nigeria is sometimes interchangeably used with the nursery school. However, it essentially means a school or class for young children, usually between the ages of four and six, immediately before they begin primary education. Practically, all the kindergartens in Nigeria are owned by private bodies or quasi government agencies.

A careful look at the Nigerian situation would reveal that a majority of these preschools are poorly run. Besides the dangerous trend of pushing small children too hard, too fast to grasp concepts and the “nuisance” of unqualified and inexperienced teachers in most of these educational centres, the learning environment, which is called the third teacher in the Reggio Emilia schools (Gandini, 2002), is hardly put into consideration in Nigeria. This is against the backdrop of the fact that researches indicating that the physical environment of preschools has an important influence on the education and development of children are resonating globally (Greenman, 1988; Bailey and Wolery, 1992; Caples, 1996; Inan, 2009). In many early childhood education centres in Nigeria, the physical/learning environment is poorly designed, without ample space, furniture, toys, wholesome pictures and other materials which a child needs for stimulation, exploration and simulation. This is particularly regrettable because a critical element in the pre-primary education philosophy is the idea of educational play. And, of course, the physical environment and the curriculum together enhance and support the child’s ability to play —do something himself/herself, initiate and complete activities, take control of his/her own actions and responsibilities, communicate and interact with others easily, and have better perceptual and motor skills (Inan, 2009).

The Nigerian situation is made worse as experience has shown that the government does not play the critical supervisory, funding and regulatory roles assigned it by the NPE. There is no government run preschool centres in Nigeria and the ones owned by private hands are not closely monitored or supervised by a designated government agency. In fact, there is no organized government regulatory body charged with this all important responsibility as it obtains at the primary level where the National Primary Education Commission (NPEC) supervises at the national level while the State Primary Education Board (SPEB) supervises at the state and local government levels. Hence, early childhood education as become an “all comers’ affair”, which is a metaphoric ill wind that blows no one any good. However, the purpose and philosophy underpinning pre-primary education is spelt out by the NPE in Nigeria (2004). This we may outline and discuss as follows:

- (a) To effect a smooth transition from the home to the school;

Since this is the first time the child is beginning to leave the home and spend a few hours in the absence of mummy, daddy and other relatives, it is always not too comfortable for the child. As he/she continues to leave the home and come back each day he/she becomes accustomed to it. By the time he/she gets into the primary school he/she would have become used to it. In fact, the first day in primary school will just be like another day.

- (b) To prepare the child for the primary level of education;

The foundation for primary level of education is laid at the pre-primary level. The early childhood level serves as a preparatory ground for the primary level. The curriculum of this introductory level prepares the child for basic education.

(c) To provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the markets, offices, etc);

The economy of Nigeria is in a bad shape, hence, an increasing number of housewives are now joining their husbands to fend for/contribute to the family income and upkeep. When mothers go to work there is the need for someone to take care of the children. House helps and nannies are not easy to come by these days. As a result of this, mothers/families are compelled to take their children to day care and other pre-primary school facilities in order to have the opportunity to go about their jobs.

(d) To inculcate social norms;

Every society has its own etiquette, savoir-fair, savoir-vivre and other mores which it necessarily bequeaths to its younger generations. The process of imparting all these social skills into children starts at the early childhood education level in Nigeria.

(e) To inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc;

At this stage the child ought to explore his/her environment and ask questions as far as his/her intellect allows him/her. Answers should always be given to all his/her questions no matter how stupid they may seem. Correspondingly too, the child must be given the opportunity to play and experiment with as many toys as can be provided.

(f) To develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;

Children have the opportunity of playing together at the foundation level of education. As they do this, they learn to cooperate with one another. And, of course, since many of them come from different homes they also learn how to tolerate one another.

(g) To learn good habits, especially good health habits;

Children are taught good habits at this level of education. They ought to be taught to say good morning sir to daddy, good morning ma'am to mummy, among others. They also ought to be taught that it is unhygienic to pick things from the ground and put them in the mouth.

(h) To teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play.

At this elementary level the child should be taught counting of numbers and reading of alphabets with fun. In fact, it is not uncommon to see a child at this stage count 1-10 without being able to recognize any of the numbers or read A-Z even though he/she cannot recognize any of the alphabets.

A quick review of the foregoing shows that the curriculum philosophy anchoring early childhood education in Nigeria is hinged on the concept of "pleasurable activity", hence, the NPE (2004) specifies that the main method of teaching at the pre-primary education level should be through play. This is consistent with the observation of Garvey (1990) which holds that a curriculum philosophy which is based on play might imply to us; (a) supply materials and toys, and (b) give the child time to interact with them and play. This implies that preschool curriculum should be based on the Whole Child principle. Inan (2009) while expatiating on the Whole Child principle draws on the findings of Bowe (2000) which suggest that to enhance the development of the child, the teacher should attend to, assess, and intervene in all the 5 domains, namely, the adaptive, cognitive, communication, physical, and social/emotional domains. Bowe asserts that "by looking at the whole child, the preschool special educator can help a child develop strengths — not just improve on areas of weakness". In every domain attention is given to the play concept. This "attention" is probably best explained with the analogy of the human brain which is likened to the computer memory in the central processing unit (CPU). If one gives the right command, it does what one desires the right way. If one gives a wrong command, it either produces negative results or refuses to do anything at all. In like manner, if one

overloads the brain (a child's brain) with information, it gets confused and ends up reproducing nothing. Therefore, it is imperative that the adult positioned to educate/train young minds understands the children and allows them to develop at their own pace with some assistance.

Along this line, Ojuederie (2007) contends that: While it might be convenient to make a naturally intelligent child to assimilate much within a short time, it is dangerous to do the same with a less intelligent child without putting the child in a confused state from which he/she may not be able to recover. It is germane to remark here that some parents and preschool teachers tend to push their tender children and wards too hard by making them to start serious learning between ages 2 and 4 years simply because early traits of intelligence is noticed in them. Some other parents/preschool teachers make their growing children and wards to read much more than their brain can assimilate because they are anxious to see the children climb quickly the educational ladder. Such parents/preschool teachers do their children/wards more harm than good. A retrospective look at the evolution of early childhood education across the globe could be very profiting as regards the essence of preschool.

When two British sisters, Rachel and Margaret McMillan, opened the first ever nursery school for children between the ages of 2 and 5 years in 1911, the intention was to provide an environment that would enable the children develop well in physical and mental health. Emphasis was on providing adequate space (indoors and outdoors) for them to move and run around freely and develop naturally. It was felt that serious learning (academic work) at this stage could interfere with normal development process of a child. Overtime, similar preschools were opened in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), United States of America (USA) and France. The ideal learning age recommended by these countries ranged from 5 – 8 years. England prescribed 5 years, USSR, the Scandinavian countries, Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands prescribed 7 years, while in the USA it varied from state to state between 6 and 8 years. In England, for example, children of ages 5 and 6 are put in infant schools where they spend a great deal of their time playing, modelling and painting (Ojuederie, 2007). Learning proper starts at 7 years, at which stage an English child is expected to be able to read and write as well as do simple arithmetic of addition and subtraction of whole numbers. Even so, it was discovered that some 7-year-old children were unable to read and write in England, USA and several other countries (Ojuederie, 2007). This is obviously because of the varying level of mental development of the children as the level of development of the brain varies from person to person. However, as noted earlier, experience has shown that this is not the case with most early childhood education centres in Nigeria.

Repositioning Preschools in Nigeria: The Children's Theatre Approach

So far, "educational play" has been identified as a critical component in the wholesome teaching/training of preschoolers. The way it has been flagrantly undermined in many Nigerian preschools has also been examined. In this section of the paper, we shall conceptualize and canvass for the use of children's theatre approach in reinforcing preschool's curriculum philosophy of "educational play" and discuss the benefits there-from. Children's theatre is an educational instructional approach which focuses on development through drama; it is a relaxed kind of theatre that is geared towards developing the participants. Its main objective is to enhance learning and intellectual development rather than entertainment of the audience. Onyeisi (2006) rightly observes that while children's drama is informed by many of the ideals and practices of theatre arts, it is principally valued as a learning medium rather than as an art form that is governed and validated through criteria other than aesthetics. Its objectives are manifold. But they are all directed towards the growth and development of the participant (the children) rather than the entertainment of the observer.

As a recreational activity, children's theatre is an exciting aspect of Theatre-in-Education (TIE) which designates all group activities designed, structured and guided by a teacher or a leader to involve children in a process of creating, improvising and experiencing theatre or drama as an art as well as a learning tool (Iyeh, 2006). This participatory approach to teaching and learning with dramatic methods, creative innovations is best begun in the pre-primary education stage. In this connection, Duruaku (2003) observes that the tender age of children makes it the more compelling

that attention should be paid to the development of effective, cognitive, and psychomotor spheres of children's growth as they participate actively and observe processes and events in dramatic exercises which lead to learning. In fact, the concept of TIE is more of a classroom exercise and has no audience in the real sense. It is more of teaching than a distinct art. This art is essentially laced with learning activities. And, of course, this is what education should be all about at the preschoolers' level in Nigeria. This is in the understanding of the fact that the basic aim of education is to cultivate the full personality through the processes of discovery and fostering of natural talents in man (Iyeh, 2006).

Here lies the interface between education and the theatre (drama) as indicated by Vallins (1971) who posited that the general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same time harmonizing the individuality thus educed with the organic unity of the social group to which the individual belongs. At the childhood education level, these "inherent talents" find expression when the preschoolers are engaged in theatrical activities such as dramatic skits and sketches, dancing, singing, mime or pantomime or other sporting activities that are not necessary workaday. Child development scholars affirm that spontaneous play stimulates creativity and develops a child's social, mental, and emotional skills (Awake!, 2004). Engaging in role playing activities or improvised dramas could be beneficial to children in a number of ways. It provides a child with the opportunity to use images and impulses to believe and adapt to his/her actions and the actions of others. Duruaku (2003) hinted this, though in a slightly different context, when he asserts that ordinary, drama refers to a play as one may see in a theatre; it can also refer to a story written for acting on the stage, or given space. Drama may also refer to the act of writing, acting or producing plays. It can also refer to a part of real life that seems to have been planned like a story or play. One thing binds all these together excitement and uniqueness of situation. It is because of this refreshing sense of uniqueness and excitement which the theatre brings we are suggesting that it should be used to strengthen the early childhood education curricula in Nigeria.

As an organized and scientific application of drama/theatre in formal educational communication, children's theatre involves young ones in creative dramatics which enables them to derive some benefits and values inherent in the art form. The following are some of the benefits that could be derived in reinforcing early childhood education with theatrical activities/children dramatics in Nigeria:

- **The development of individual personal resources**
Teaching through theatre would encourage the development of individual personal resources of preschoolers. These resources according to Vallins (1971) are those of sensory perception, intellect, imagination, powers of concentration, physical and verbal skills and emotional control. He goes further to contend that it is only through the theatre medium that all these resources could be brought into play and exercised in conjunction with one another. As the children grow they would develop worthwhile values and attitudes which in turn will enable them to have insights to basic principles and concepts of education and life.
- **Promotion of pupils' social development**
Social interaction is improved by theatre participation. Theatre requires team-work and close relationship with others through periods of stress, work and relaxation. Educational play as actualised through the instrumentality of the theatre stimulates interest and provides variety within and outside the classroom. The competitive spirit is also developed because the actors'/pupils' ultimate goals are to receive appreciation. Besides, using the theatre approach to train preschoolers would assist the teachers to learn, first hand, some of the complexities in the emotional, physical and social development of children.
- **Promotion of physical health**
Theatre/drama recreates the human body and mind. Hence, when preschoolers are constantly encouraged to learn the ropes of education and life through physical activities such as dramatization games, role playing, drawing and painting, merry-go-round activities,

improvised acting, rhyme recitation, singing, seesaw riding and so on, the experience got contributes to their physical fitness and creates joy and happiness in them

- **Development of creativity**
Creativity is inborn, but the discipline and order involved in creative work, be it improvised or not may be acquired within organized theatre programme as offered in TIE. This may have prompted Ebi (2005) to note that dramatic arts education is an important means of stimulating creativity in children. Preschoolers through the agency of drama could begin to use their initiative in the creation of art and things of beauty. A talented kid may not be able to activate his creative energy and direct it, but theatre participation brings the talent to the fore and gives it the opportunity for full expression even at the foundation level of education.
- **Moral and spiritual development**
Children's involvement in TIE helps them develop and improve their understanding and appreciation of morality. The level of an individual's attainment of sound moral personality depends largely on the attitude he/she acquires during his/her early childhood. Therefore, engaging children in creative dramatics activity helps them in developing moral and healthy attitudes towards themselves and others. For, example, the Holy Bible of the Christians emphasizes the importance of early moral training to child's personality development. It admonishes a Christian to "Train up a child in the way he should grow, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverb 22:6). At the preschoolers' level, theatre provides a fun filled template on which the moral moorings of children can be set.
- **Appreciation of who they are and the development of skills to cope with the wider society**
Children's participation in creative dramatics opens the windows of their mind towards the appreciation of who they are through the exploration of oneself, others as well as the larger world. Drama involves the re-enactment of life on stage as lived or imagined. In this case, drama has to do with collection of life experiences concerning human existence. As preschoolers, they could be guided on how to appreciate the importance of drama in understanding the world. Being a social activity, the theatre demands from the participants (in this case, children) a group sensitivity and group awareness which readily leads towards integration into the wider society. Overtime, a sense of self worth would become ingrained in the young ones as they deploy the acquired communication skills in peer relations as well as other social intercourses.

There is perhaps no more powerful tool than theatre to reach children. It taps into the instinct with which they are born, the instinct to explore by pretending - the instinct that, unfortunately, all too often is attacked by a world that pushes them to focus more on how they measure up than on who they truly are and can be. Through theatre all children are equal and free to explore. There are no wrong answers to fear and no competition to fall short of - only the chance to try on being someone else and, by doing so, to discover a little more of themselves. What a beautiful pedestal to start building the educational dream of all and sundry. However, it must be noted that the success of the theatre approach in supporting early childhood education depends largely on the teacher's imaginative and organizational abilities. He or she must assume the status of a life coach who must have tons of enduring patience which the children will often tax to the limits. The teacher must see his/her job as a helping profession so as to be able to instil confidence and make learning a fascinating challenge to children (Awake!, 2002).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined early childhood education from the Nigerian perspective. It observed that many parents and preschool teachers/early childhood education facility providers in Nigeria tend to push their tender children and wards too hard by making them to start serious learning between ages 2 and 4 years simply because early traits of intelligence is noticed in them. While frowning at this untoward phenomenon, the paper lays the greatest blame at the doorsteps of the Nigerian government which has refused to play its supervisory, funding and inspection roles effectively at that level of education. It further backs up its claims by reviewing standard examples from other countries and submits that there is an urgent need to reposition the Nigerian early childhood education sector. As part of the panoply of strategies to comprehensively reposition the foundation levels of education in Nigeria, the paper suggested the deployment of drama/theatre which is a veritable instrument in the development of children, especially those at the pre- primary level whose curriculum philosophy revolves round the concept of educational play. Besides, an effective application of theatrical principles and concepts in teaching/training children promises to recreate, enliven and broaden the horizons of both the preschool teachers and pupils. This is aside the obvious fact that such a step is bound to positively rub off on other higher levels of learning.

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