

A programme evaluation of pre-primary education reform, and policy, in Plateau State, Nigeria

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Contextualisation

This paper presents a brief overview of the educational system in Nigeria with an emphasis on the pre-primary education level. It addresses the international literature on early childhood pedagogy and assesses to what extent pre-primary education policy in Nigeria is inspired by this literature. The paper will pay special attention to the shortcomings and obstacles encountered in trying to implement the pre-primary education policy of Plateau State in Nigeria

Abstract: *The current study is an evaluation of the pre-primary education policy in Plateau State in Nigeria. It was inspired by my own experience as a school teacher/principal who has seen the effects on primary schools and the results of a lack of government investment in the sector, itself leading to a proliferation of 'private owners'. Because of these circumstances the implementation of central policy is highly dependent on the varying understanding of these owners. The study will employ both qualitative and quantitative techniques in data collection through the use of questionnaire, interviews, classroom observation and use of documents. The data will be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results will hopefully be used, not only to add to existing literature, but also to improve the system serving as a basis for further research in the area.*

Introduction

Over the past few years, the Nigerian education system has undergone extensive revision with the aim of making education more relevant and functional to its citizens. This effort has been further reinforced by the introduction, on 30th September 1999, of Universal Basic Education (UBE). This was part of a strategy towards ensuring universal education for children by the year 2015 (Research and Publications Unit of the Planning Research and Statistics Department, 2002).

All the levels of education in Nigeria, namely pre-primary, primary, secondary, technical and tertiary, have a common guiding document; the National Policy on Education (NPE). This is intended to show that the Nigerian Government recognises the importance of education in the development of all ethnic groups (FGN, 1998). Although the national policy is drafted to satisfy the aspirations of the government, its implementation at the pre-primary level is almost impossible, as its interpretation is left to those providing the service. However, the Nigerian government has invested in the implementation of education at all levels, with the exception of the pre-primary level, where it is to be managed solely by private owners. The implementation of the pre-primary policy by these private owners is variable.

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Rationale for the study

The Common Country System analysis used by the United Nations (2001) reviewed the education system in Nigeria and argued that there was a lack of adequate funding by government at the pre-primary level and also a lack of adequate infrastructure at that level. It called for an examination of the pre-primary education provision where little work has been done.

Similarly, the report of the Plateau State Primary Education Board (SPEB), showed that there was a lack of infrastructure at the primary level of education in all the local government areas of the state, primarily due to a lack of funding by the State Government (SPEB, 1997). However, my experience, as a teacher and school principal, has shown me that other factors such as, a lack of adequate infrastructure, insufficient numbers of qualified teachers to take care of the large student population and a lack of political will, by government, might have contributed to the poor educational quality experienced in schools today.

Lack of government participation at the pre-primary level of education has created an avenue for the proliferation of 'private owners' to establish pre-primary schools in different parts of the state. Most of these owners, it can be argued, do not even understand the national policy and lack the necessary educational background to run a school. One wonders, therefore, if these 'private owners' can implement the national policy in the way that it was designed to be done. To allow room for improvement and excellence, any system needs to be appraised and this appraisal process is paramount. The study outlined in this research note will therefore aim to evaluate the programme of pre-primary education in the Plateau State of Nigeria, with a view to finding out how the national policy - to achieve equal access and its other educational objectives - is being implemented, and thereafter make suggestions as to the way this may be carried forward.

The National Policy on Education (NPE)

The National Policy on Education, which emerged in 1976, was revised in 1981, and then again in 1998, is a document that is intended to guide the educational system in Nigeria, from pre-primary level, through primary, secondary, and technical levels, up to the tertiary levels. The document presents national objectives which include: a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a united, strong and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy and a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

The objectives for pre-primary education were derived from these national goals. The policy also stated that the quality of instruction at all levels had to be oriented towards inculcating the values of:

'...respect for the dignity and worth of the individual, faith in man's ability to make rational decisions, moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations, shared responsibility for the common good of society, respect for the dignity of labour, promotion of the emotional, physical and psychological health of all children, and acquisition of competencies necessary for self reliance' (FGN, 1998, p 3).

The policy expresses high expectations for its implementation and those of all other stakeholders, such as parents, and indeed everybody.

Pre-primary policy

The pre-primary level, as described by the policy, is that stage which prepares the child for primary school. Thus the period prior to primary school is the area of focus. Although the Government has no investment at this level, it has clearly outlined the objectives for its operators to follow. These included the following objectives: to effect smooth transition from home to the school; to prepare the child for the primary level of education; to provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the market, offices, etc). In addition, the objectives were to inculcate social norms; to inculcate in the child, the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art music and playing with toys; to develop a sense of co-operation and teamwork; to learn good habits, especially good health habits and to teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colour, shape, forms, and through play.

The Governments role at this level is to encourage private participation, make provision for teacher education to take care of the pre-primary level, ensure that the medium of communication at that level is the mother tongue (and therefore to develop the orthography of Nigerian languages), to ensure that the main method of teaching at this level is play based. The Government also performs a supervisory and regulatory role.

Because the Government has no direct investment in the pre-primary level, the owners charge high fees. These can only be afforded by a few privileged parents. Therefore the educational foundations laid at the pre-primary level, which are very crucial in the educational development of a child, are absent for some children. This particularly affects children that are disadvantaged, such as the children of the poor, or children with a disability/special needs, who are denied access to education. There is no provision for them at the early years stage making future life difficult, and unbearable, for them. Moreover children are expected to have a smooth transition from home to school. A lot is therefore expected from both parents and teachers.

Pedagogical theory and its integration in Nigerian pre-primary education policy

Sylva and Lunt (1990) argue that a lot of children's social habits, such as being polite and using expressions such as 'please', are learnt and acquired in the home and are reinforced by teachers in the school. These authors affirm that reinforcement is a strong factor in learning. The use of rewards to encourage good behaviour, and punishment to discourage bad habits/behaviour, are sometimes used. Child development theorists, such as Vygotsky, Piaget and Chomsky, suggest that a child's learning is influenced by both their biological make up and the social interactions they experience (Bruce and Meggitt, 2002; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1994). This assertion suggests a belief that environment influences the learning ability of a child and could serve as a means of inculcating those attributes identified by the National Policy.

Ellyat (2004) argues that education should be centred on the child and that most of their learning should be through play. This type of learning should also inform before-school, during-school, and after-school experience. The National Policy on Education in Nigeria also, in its objectives, encourages learning at the pre-primary level to be carried out through play. Play is, it can be argued, an important and integral part of learning, not only for the child, but even for adults. During the act of play the child has a better opportunity to explore, create, and discover; thereby developing his/her skill and potentials to the maximum. Learning and play occur in tandem, as far as the pre-primary school child is concerned.

Ellyat (2004) further argues, from a constructivist point of view, that a child is a constructor of his/her own ideas or activities, where the child is at the centre in relation to others around him/her. This focus on the child might enable effective interaction between the child, the environment, and the adult or teachers. The result of this relationship might arguably lead to positive results. However, teachers at the pre-primary level quite often base their students' ratings on academic, rather than behavioural, outcomes and the child's ability to initiate his/her own activities.

The Nigerian Policy context

The Nigerian National Policy on Education placed the child at the centre of learning activities, but left out how this was to be achieved, and implemented, in the hands of 'private owners'. An enabling environment might be thought necessary for effective implementation of the policy. In this context an enabling environment would not just be the school situation; it would go beyond this, to the entire society within which both the school, and the child, exist. Economic stability and a stable political system also go a long way in sustaining the implementation of the educational system. Carr-Hill (1988) argued in his research that even agencies that support education in developing countries have realised that a good project, in a poor or hostile educational environment, was unsustainable.

The frequent unrest experienced in Nigeria over the past few years has caused much instability and, consequently, might have an adverse effect on investment in all areas of the economy. In a similar contribution arising from a workshop, itself organised by the family support programme, Akinmade, asserts that, when institutions run effectively and efficiently, individuals in the society enjoy peace, good health, security, prosperity and abundant life. However, a break down, or malfunctioning, of any societal institution might expose society and the people to great risk (Family Support Programme, 1997). The Nigerian government's participation in the implementation of its national policy, in partnership with 'private owners', might help to ensure that the programme was sustained and the set objectives, achieved. Moreover, the present reforms, on education for all by the year 2015, advocate equal access to quality education for every child.

International agencies

The importance of participation by all stakeholders probably explains why most international agencies have decided to work on a counterpart funding basis. They emphasise the importance of institutional development, capacity building and strengthening and also a strengthening of the planning system (Bentall, Carr-Hill and Cox, 2000). There is need for institutional development and improvement so that adequate quality care, and education, is given to the child at the pre-primary level. To enhance this process, some motivational facilities need to be put in place (OECD, 2001). The funding agencies involved include, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO and international banks. Nigeria is one of the beneficiaries of these funding sources, as is Plateau State. The international contribution has made the government pay more attention to early child education. The contributions of these agencies are very much acknowledged. However, they also need to allow programmes to be driven by the nation's own needs and goals, and not be tailored to their own agenda and objectives. The efforts of these agencies, in terms of pre-primary education, need to be directed towards the training of teachers, and provision of facilities, in collaboration with the 'private owners', who are the service providers, at the pre-primary level.

The Nigerian national context

Nigeria has joined the world in its pursuit of early childhood education, through its participation in the Dakar World Declaration on Education for All, and, more recently, in its introduction of Universal Basic Education (UBE). This effort is directed towards making every child have access to education. But in practice, especially at the pre-primary level, the situation is far from ideal, because most of the pre-primary schools are fee charging and only a few parents can afford them therefore making access limited or impossible.

The Nigerian government took a decision to make education free at the primary level and to also provide one egg per child per day, in order to improve the nutritional status of the child; because of the importance of good health in relation to education. This decision excludes the pre-primary children, because their education is in the hands of 'private owners'.

In addition, pre-primary schools in Nigeria, and the Plateau State in particular, belong to different types of ownership. These range from those owned by individuals to Islamic, Missionary, community and Government owned schools. Out of nearly 350 pre-primary schools in Plateau State only six belong to government at the local level (Plateau state Ministry of Education, 2004).

Methodology

The methodology proposed for the study adopts a mixed approach based on a positivist and interpretive perspective because the study is concerned with both child-centred education and the entire society within which, she/he relates. Its policy implementation is also centred on the well-being of the child. The research involves an evaluation of pre-primary education reforms, and policy, in Plateau state. It will adapt the CIPP model, which focuses on Context, Input, Process, and Product evaluation as developed by Stufflebeam (Stufflebeam *et al.*, 1971) and the Expertise based model, developed by Eisner (cited in Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996). Stufflebeam *et al.* (*ibid*) looked at evaluation as a process of deliberating, obtaining and providing useful information. It involved four aspects; the context, the input, the process and the product. Eisner argued that identifying an aspect and then evaluating that aspect was also important. There are two aspects to this approach, 'connoisseurship' and 'educational criticism'.

The CIPP model in detail

The CIPP approach involves a number of stages. The first is 'Context' evaluation. This is concerned with the goals, in the current context, of the National Policy and that for pre-primary education. It is considered right from the planning stage, to find out whether it is appropriate for the level it is meant to serve and under which circumstances the policy becomes operational. Here the policy is already in place. But I intend to find out from the policy makers and school owners its suitability and functionality.

The second aspect is that of 'Input' evaluation. This provides information on the resources available and how they are used to achieve the set goals. This includes the quality of teachers, the quality of, and the facilities available to them, and of the pupils themselves, their facilities, teaching aids, games facilities, toys, and the learning environment in general. It also needs to consider funding and how this influences the learning process. Again the study will investigate the availability of resources, both human and material, and evaluate their impact on the attainment of the set objectives.

A further process in this approach involves 'Process' evaluation. This provides information on how the teaching is done, policy implementation, feedback after supervision/inspection and

pupil enrolment over a period of time. Here it is going to be the assessment of the ongoing activity, which includes the teaching process, enrolment and the use of available resources that is of interest.

The final stage of the CIPP process involves 'Product evaluation'. This is to determine the effectiveness of the programme in achieving the set goals of its policy. It also relates the objectives of the pre-primary education to those of the National Goals in terms of attainment. The overall result will be considered and studied in order to ascertain the extent to which these objectives have been met in practice.

The Expertise model

This approach is informed by an emphasis on two factors. The first is the notion of 'connoisseurship'. This will enable identification of some key areas to be looked at in the school, and with the policy makers, after which those aspects will be further evaluated. For the purpose of this study, and because it is not possible to look at all the policy objectives, the areas to be looked at are those that have to do with equal access, a spirit of co-operation and team work, and, creativity and enquiry. The second factor is 'educational criticism'. This involves the evaluation of those areas identified above. The use of this model allows selection, among some of the policy objectives, to be made.

The proposed study sample

Out of the nearly 350 pre-primary schools in Plateau State, a sample of seventy-three schools will be selected. These will be chosen using a stratified sampling technique based on the different locations of the schools. To ensure that every school type is adequately represented, disproportionate simple random sampling will also be used for the final selection of the sample: in all 20% of each number will be used (Table1). The respondents will include: policy makers, because of their role as stipulated in the policy; school owners; teachers; and some parents of the children attending the selected pre-primary schools. The respondents will also be interviewed; a questionnaire will be administered to them in order to ascertain their comprehension and implementation of the policy.

Table 1. Total number of schools by type in the different senatorial zones in plateau state.

Sample Number	School type	Northern zone	Central zone	Southern zone	TOTAL
1	Community	10	8	4	22
2	Individual	133	13	23	170
3	Islamic	21	4	3	28
4	Missionary	74	26	23	123
5	Government	2	2	2	6
TOTAL		240	53	55	349

Other sources of data will include: classroom observation; records; reports; and enrolment registers covering the preceding nine years, to assess the trend of admission. This is to allow assessment of whether equal access has been given to boys and girls, and then to urban, and rural, children. Sample sizes for this aspect of the study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample sizes to be used in the study

Sample Number	Participant	Number.
1	Ministry.	8
2	Teachers.	219
3	School owners.	73
4	Parents.	73
	Total.	373

It is hoped that the study will contribute not only to the deliberations of policy makers and their knowledge, but also to serve as baseline for further work in Plateau State, and Nigeria in general, in the area of policy implementation, with a view to providing equal access to pre-primary education for every child.

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