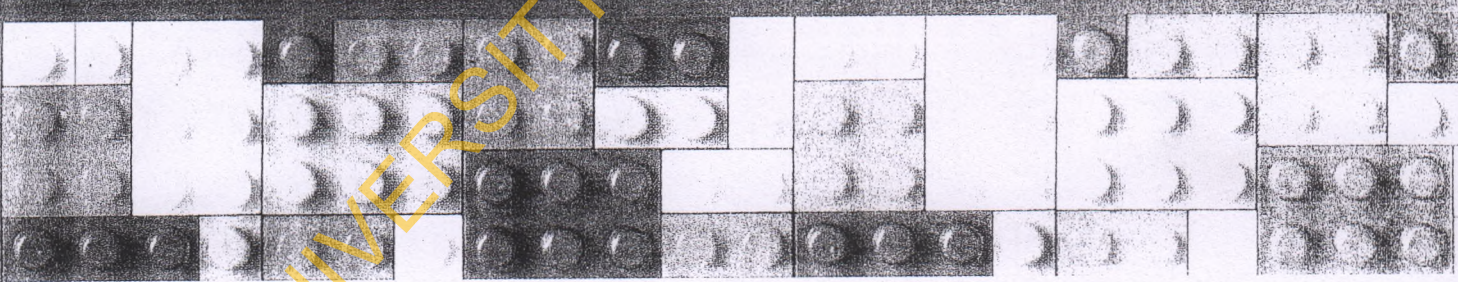# Debates on Early Childhood Policies and Practices

Global snapshots of pedagogical thinking and encounters

Edited by

DEBATES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Global snapshots of pedagogical thinking and encounters

Edited by Theodora Papatheodorou

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CONTRIBUTORS

Evelyn Angiwan, Professor of Early Childhood at Benguet State University, the Philippines, has been an early childhood practitioner since 1983. She holds a Master of Arts in Education from the University of Baguio, and a PhD in Educational Management from the University of the Cordilleras in the Philippines. She pioneered and served as teacher and directress at the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) Integrated Preschool for 17 years and as teacher and coordinator at the Early Childhood Development Centre at Benguet State University for three years. She developed an early childhood curricular programme for teacher education in 2000. Currently, she is teaching on major early childhood disciplines. She is also a speaker and facilitator at national and local training events.

Carol Aubrey is Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood at the University of Warwick and Visiting Professor at Birmingham City University, UK. She trained as a primary school teacher and educational psychologist and spent a number of years in primary teacher education, focusing on the early years, first at University College Cardiff and then at the University of Durham. Her research interests lie in the areas of childhood policy and services, and early learning and development, especially early mathematics development and inclusion/special education needs.

Gill Boag-Munroe, PhD, currently works in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, UK, teaching on the MSc in Learning and Teaching. She was part of the team which conducted the National Evaluation of the Early Learning Parenting Partnerships. She is also the Reviews Editor for the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching* (European Mentoring and Coaching Council).

Sue Callan is currently Associate Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at the Open University, UK. She has a research interest in critical reflective

practice, and regularly contributes to publications focusing on the developing professionalism of the early years workforce. She has worked in further and higher education since 1990 specialising in community-based practice, in particular working with mature students in both personal tutor and mentor roles.

Keryn Davis is an early-years professional development facilitator at CORE Education Ltd in Christchurch, New Zealand. Her interests include collaborative practitioner research and change, teaching and learning in the early years and assessment. She has worked collaboratively with practitioners, primary advisors and academics promoting cross-sector relationships and understandings for the past ten years. Currently, her work is split between facilitating Ministry of Education-funded professional development and research.

Florence Dinneen, PhD, former Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland, now works as a freelance consultant in early childhood care and education. She has recently completed a review of early childhood curricula with an international dimension and combines her interest in curricula with her ongoing research into professionalism in the field of early childhood care and education. Her specific curricular focus is on relational pedagogy.

Hasina Banu Ebrahim is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education (ECE – birth to nine) at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Her interest lies in deepening knowledge and practice for ECE, teacher education and research from local realities. She is interested in alternative perspectives for enhancing practice, strengthening research capacities and informing policy. She is Deputy President of the South African Research Association for ECE.

Rozalina Engels-Kritidis, PhD, is Chief Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education, Sofia University 'St Kliment Ohridski', Bulgaria. She teaches several academic disciplines, especially the basis and theory of pre-school education, and language acquisition and speech development in the early years. She is co-author of the Friends pre-school educational programme, approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education. Her scientific interests include allegory interpretation by pre-schoolers and the education of migrant children.

Jan Georgeson is Research Fellow in Early Education Development at Plymouth University, UK. She taught in the early years sector from 1984, mainly working with children with special educational needs. In 2006, she completed her doctorate in educational disadvantage and special educational needs, researching organisational structure and pedagogy and interaction in day nurseries and pre-school playgroups. Since then, she has worked on several research projects on disability and children's voice, and supporting parents as educators of very young children. She has particular interest in practitioners taking vocational pathways into work in early years settings, and from 2006 has been involved with training early years professionals.

Athina Kammenou has studied Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, and obtained a postgraduate degree in Special Education. She has taught in the Faculty of Kindergarten Teachers in the canton of Geneva. She is currently a laboratory assistant at the Department of Preschool Education of the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Athens, Greece. She is responsible for creating and implementing individualised programmes for the integration of children with special needs.

Chul Woo Lee, from Seoul in South Korea, is a graduate of Benguet State University, the Philippines. He holds a PhD in Educational Management. His thesis on current early childhood practices in Benguet served as a benchmark for the establishment of his early childcare centre in Manila.

Shu-Ying Liu is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at the National Hsinchu University of Education, Taiwan. She also teaches at Macau University, and previously in the UK, USA and Portugal. She has led projects writing hand-books for creative dance in early childhood and elementary education for Taiwanese teachers, and edited and translated several English dance books into Chinese. She has a PhD from Roehampton University, UK, and an MFA from UCLA, USA.

Percyveranda A. Lubrica holds a PhD in Educational Management from Benguet State University, the Philippines. She served as Dean of the College of Teacher Education for nine and a half years. She spearheaded the institutionalisation of the Early Childhood Education Centre as a pre-school laboratory of the university and the development of an early childhood curricular programme. She taught diverse learners in Maryland, USA, for an academic year. She is a national speaker and lecturer in the field of education and she is actively involved in generating research to improve educational policies and practices.

Janet Moyles is Professor Emeritus at Anglia Ruskin University, UK, and a play/early years consultant. She has worked as an early years teacher and head and has written and edited widely. Her books include *Just Playing?* (OUP, 1989), *The Excellence of Play* (OUP, 2009) and *Effective Leadership and Management in the Early Years* (OUP, 2007). She has directed several research projects including 'Jills of All Trades?' (ATL, 1996), 'Too Busy to Play?' (Esmée Fairbairn Trust/University of Leicester, 1997–2000), 'SPEEL (Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning)' (DfES, 2002) and 'Recreating the Reception Year' (ATL, 2003). Her PhD was in the area of play, learning and practitioner roles.

Pamela Oberhuemer was based for many years at the State Institute of Early Childhood Research in Munich, Germany, and currently works as a freelance researcher and journal editor. Her research foregrounds cross-national perspectives relating to early childhood education and care systems, curricular frameworks, and initial and continuing professional development. Her most recent book (with Inge

Schreyer and Michelle Neuman) on the 27 European Union countries is *Professionals in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems: European Profiles and Perspectives* (Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2010).

Elin Eriksen Ødegaard, PhD, is Associate Professor at the Centre of Educational Research at Bergen University College, Norway, where she is leading the project 'Kindergarten as an Arena for Cultural Formation', founded by the Norwegian Research Council. The subjects of her published books and articles include narrative inquiry, children's play and meaning making, teacher professionalism, history and politics. She is also head of the Norwegian branch of OMEP, the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education.

Monica Odinko is Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She holds two PhDs on educational evaluation of early childhood-related matters: one from the University of Ibadan (2002) and the other from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland (2007). She obtained an MEd in Guidance and Counselling and a BEd in Pre-Primary and Primary Education/ Language and Arts from the University of Ibadan. Her research interests include: evaluation of pre-school teaching and learning activities; comparative study of basic education; material provisions and learning resources and their use in teaching and learning; and instructional modes at the basic level of education.

Theodora Papatheodorou, PhD and MBPsS, is an early childhood educator and researcher. She trained as pre-school teacher and worked initially as nursery teacher and then in higher education. Her teaching and research are in the areas of pre-school curriculum and pedagogy, educational and social inclusion, behaviour problems, multicultural pedagogy and bilingualism. She is the author of *Behaviour Problems in the Early Years* (Routledge, 2005) and co-editor (with Janet Moyles) of *Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring Relational Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2009) and *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Early Childhood* (Sage, 2012); and co-author (with Paulette Luff and Janet Gill) of *Child Observation for Learning and Research* (Pearson, 2011).

Sally Peters, PhD, is Associate Professor at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand with a background in early childhood education and a particular interest in children's development from 0 to 8 years. She has been involved in a range of research projects, including several Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) projects, on which she worked collaboratively with ECE and/or school teachers.

Michael Reed is Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester, UK. He teaches on undergraduate and postgraduate courses. His most recent research has focused upon developing communities of professional practice and how tutors can most effectively research student learning as active participants

in the process. He is an experienced author and has developed a number of edited texts for Sage Publications.

Peter Rule, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Adult Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. His research interests include dialogue and learning, case study methodology and emancipatory action research. He has experience of working with NGOs in KwaZulu-Natal in the fields of adult literacy, disability, gender and early childhood development.

Sharon Smith is course leader for the Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years (SEFDEY) and Foundation Degree Learning Support at South Worcestershire College and a part-time Lecturer at the University of Worcester, UK. She has a Master's degree in Education and her research interests include working with mature students to deliver higher education in further education institutions. Her background is in classroom practice and special educational needs. She has been a member of the University of Worcester SEFDEY partnership team for six years, with a special interest in developing virtual learning environments.

Anita Soni, DEd Psy, is an educational psychologist with specialism in early years. She works part time as Senior Lecturer at Coventry University, UK, and Academic Tutor at the University of Birmingham, UK, and independently with primary schools and children's centres in the West Midlands. She has a particular interest in the personal, social and emotional development of children, the key person approach and the use of group supervision with those working with children and families.

Manabu Sumida is Associate Professor of Science Education in the Faculty of Education at Ehime University, Japan. He earned his PhD in Science Education from Hiroshima University, Japan. His research areas are culture studies in science education and science education for the early childhood years. He has been a committee member of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2003, the TIMSS 1999 Video Study and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessement (PISA) in 2006. He received the Young Students' Award from the Japan Society for Science Education in 1996 and the Best Paper Presentation in 2007 and 2008. He received the Young Scholars' Award from the Society of Japan Science Teaching in 1999. He is Director of the Japan Society for Science Education.

7

EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

Monica Odinko

OVERVIEW

In Nigeria, pre-school education is seen by the Government as one of the compulsory levels of education that young children must be exposed to. To ensure uniformity and good quality provision, the Government has set out guidelines for provision and curriculum development. This chapter discusses the findings of research which was conducted with the aim to investigate providers' compliance with policy requirements. The study sample consisted of 216 pre-school teachers, teaching 3,150 pupils, aged 3–5 years. Two observational instruments, the Classroom Interaction Sheet (CIS) and the Ten-Minute Interaction (TMI), were used to record teaching–learning processes. Policy and curriculum documents were also analysed.

The results revealed that there was a discrepancy between policy guidelines and pre-school practices, especially with regard to class size, teaching method, language of instruction and site facilities and resources. Teacher-initiated interactions and whole-class activities prevailed, while learner-initiated interactions and individual/small-group activities were less frequently observed. The language of instruction was English instead of the language of the home or immediate environment. Suggestions and recommendations for improving pre-school provision in Nigeria are discussed in the light of these findings.

Key words: Nigeria; pre-school education; curriculum; policy; pedagogy.

Introduction

The importance of giving young children quality care and education has received recognition both internationally and within Nigeria. Issues pertinent to early childhood care and education (ECCE) were prominent in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly 1989), the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO 1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO 2000). The latter included ECCE as number one of the six EFA goals, by placing emphasis on 'expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children' (UNESCO 2000: 17).

The Nigerian Government is a signatory to each of these decisions and it has included ECCE as one of the compulsory levels of Universal Basic Education (UBE) through which every Nigerian child must pass. As articulated by the Nigerian Government, UBE focuses on provision of nine years of schooling which includes ECCE provision, primary education and the first three years of secondary education. The government has prescribed that this level of education must be free, universal, compulsory, functional and of high quality. Pre-school services are offered by central and local government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and private entrepreneurs.

Pre-school education in Nigeria: policy issues

The formal education of pre-school children, 3 to 5 years old, was first mentioned in the Nigerian National Curriculum Conference in 1969, but it only appeared in the nation's educational document in 1977 (Osokoya 1989). Prior to its formal inclusion in the Nigerian policy, there were pre-school institutions in some cities and towns, run by individuals or or organisations (Osokoya 2000; Ukeje and Aisiku 1982). In the past two decades, the opinion of the Nigerian Government on pre-school education has changed, as a result of the nation's educational goals which are geared towards 'creating an enabling environment for the Nigerian child to thrive and develop to the fullest potential as well as the aspiration of building a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens' (FRN 1977–2011, section 1: 3e: 5–6). Research results on the importance of giving children appropriate stimulation during the early years of life to ensure a reasonable and healthy development have also contributed to the emphasis given to pre-school education.

In the nation's policy document of 1977 (revised in 1981, 1985, 1998, 2004), pre-school education was referred to as early childhood education. It was defined as 'the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children from age 0–5 years in a crèche, nursery or kindergarten' (FRN 1997–2011, section 2: 10). This definition of pre-school education shows the Nigerian Government's commitment to the realisation of the first goal of EFA. Pre-primary education is viewed as a 'foundation stone and is considered indispensable to future or life-long education by the government' (Olorunfunmi 2000: 7). Educational settings where pre-school

education is offered include the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten. These settings cater for children from birth until the age they are ready to be admitted into the primary school (FRN 1977–2011, section 2: 11).

The Nigerian Government is now directly involved in the establishment of pre-school institutions and it is saddled with the responsibilities of:

> provision and distribution of policy guidelines for the establishment and management of pre-primary institutions; production and development of appropriate National Curriculum and textbooks in Nigerian Languages; approval of relevant supplementary reading materials and teachers/instructors' manual; supervision and control of quality of such institutions.
>
> (FRN 1977–2011, section 2: article 12: 11)

Objectives of pre-school education in Nigeria

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), after due consultations with stakeholders, concluded that the general goals for ECCE are to

> effect a smooth transition from the home to the school; prepare the Nigerian child for the primary level of education; inculcate social norms in the child; inculcate in the child, the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc; develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit; learn good habits, especially good health habits; and teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, etc, through play.
>
> (FRN 1977–2011, section 2: 11a–h: 4)

To achieve these goals, the Nigerian Government decided to do the following (FRN 1977–2011: 11–12):

- establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community/private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education;
- make provisions in teacher education programmes for specialisation in early childhood education;
- ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community;
- ensure that the main method of teaching 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 Government recommended that the teacher–pupil ratio shall be 1:25;
- set up avenues for monitoring minimum standards for early childcare centres in the country;
- ensure that the staff of pre-primary institutions are adequately trained and that essential equipment [is] provided.

The objective of ECCE programmes in Nigeria, as stated in the policy document, is geared towards ensuring the *all-round* development of Nigerian children. This covers the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains.

To monitor compliance, the government inaugurated the Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development project (IECCD) under the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC 2002). Minimum standards were prescribed by the NERDC in areas such as:

- types of ECCE centres to be opened;
- location of the ECCE centre close to children's homes;
- requirements for starting a centre and actions that could lead to closure of a centre;
- nature of the building and class size with enough space (at least 16 square metres for 20–25 children) to give room for free movement;
- classroom environment and seating arrangements that are flexible, not rigid as in a formal school setting;
- infrastructure and type of furniture (child-size);
- instructional materials (child-friendly reading materials, corners for science, health and nutrition, drama, shopping, resting and reading should be put in place);
- daily programmes;
- human resources/personnel;
- basic qualification for teachers.

The document also indicated that the government should be in charge of the licensing, supervision, monitoring and assessment of pre-schools to ensure quality control, training of suitably qualified personnel, provision of infrastructure, personnel and gender-fair instructional materials for both government and community-owned centres. All these were put together by the stakeholders to ensure uniformity as well as provision of services that are of high quality.

Nigerian pre-primary curriculum

As the name pre-primary education suggests, preparatory classes are available prior to primary school entry. Relevant qualitative and quantitative information and recommendations, received by stakeholders (policy makers, parents, teachers and school administrators) were considered for inclusion in the curriculum content of pre-primary education. The recommended learning experiences include: children's exposure to creative arts, social norms, physical and health education, language and communication skills, mathematical skills, as well as scientific and reflective thinking. The content shows that care was taken to ensure that the curriculum caters for the *all-round* development of Nigerian children. Teaching methods and instructional material were also recommended.

The curriculum content signifies that the Nigerian child who passes through a pre-school programme would be able to exhibit behaviours appropriate for

transition to primary school. The child would be emotionally prepared to adjust to another environment outside of her/his home and/or the pre-school setting. Furthermore, the child should be able to express her/himself clearly, recite rhymes, use writing tools and materials correctly, identify letters of the alphabet in both small and capital forms, identify objects, shapes, colours, count freely up to each child's level of ability and recognise number symbols.

The extent to which these laudable policies and curriculum requirements are adhered to by providers and practitioners has not yet been investigated by Nigerian researchers. Therefore a study to evaluate the level of compliance with these policies was necessary. The study, discussed in this chapter, was conducted with the aim of gathering information and answering the following research questions:

1. What is the level of compliance by pre-school institutions in Nigeria with respect to (i) using the recommended curriculum; and (ii) meeting the objectives of setting up this level of education, as indicated by the policy?
2. What is the direction of communication during instructional practices?
3. What is the nature of class context in the schools observed?

Methodology

The target population for this study comprised Nigerian pre-school teachers working with 3–5+ year olds, enrolled in pre-schools located in three selected states of the country. The study sample was selected using stratified sampling (Kerlinger and Lee 2000). The country was stratified along the three major regions: Eastern, Western and Northern. Each of the regions has special characteristics as depicted by the socio-political history, geographical location, cultural orientation, educational development, linguistic propensity and religious background. A state that reflected the special characteristics of each region was selected for the study (see Figure 7.1).

In all, 24 pre-school institutions were randomly selected from each state. In each selected pre-school, three pre-school classrooms were randomly chosen to represent children aged 3+, 4+ and 5+. In total, 72 pre-primary schools were selected – 216 classrooms led by 216 teachers.

The researcher collected data using observational techniques and documentary analysis. More specifically, the CIS and TMI observational schedules were used (i) to monitor and record the teachers' and the learners' behaviour patterns in the classroom; (ii) to find out if the pupils learn through the methods recommended in the curriculum; and (iii) to determine the classroom climate – direction of interaction. These observational schedules provide information on the frequency and sequence of categories of behaviour observed in the classroom.

The data collection involved the training of five research assistants on the technicalities of using the observational schedules to ensure their consistent use. In all, six people were involved in the data collection exercise, including the researcher. Two researchers were sent to each state. Each teacher and the pupils were observed once. Each lesson was observed for 30 minutes using the instruments. Subjects
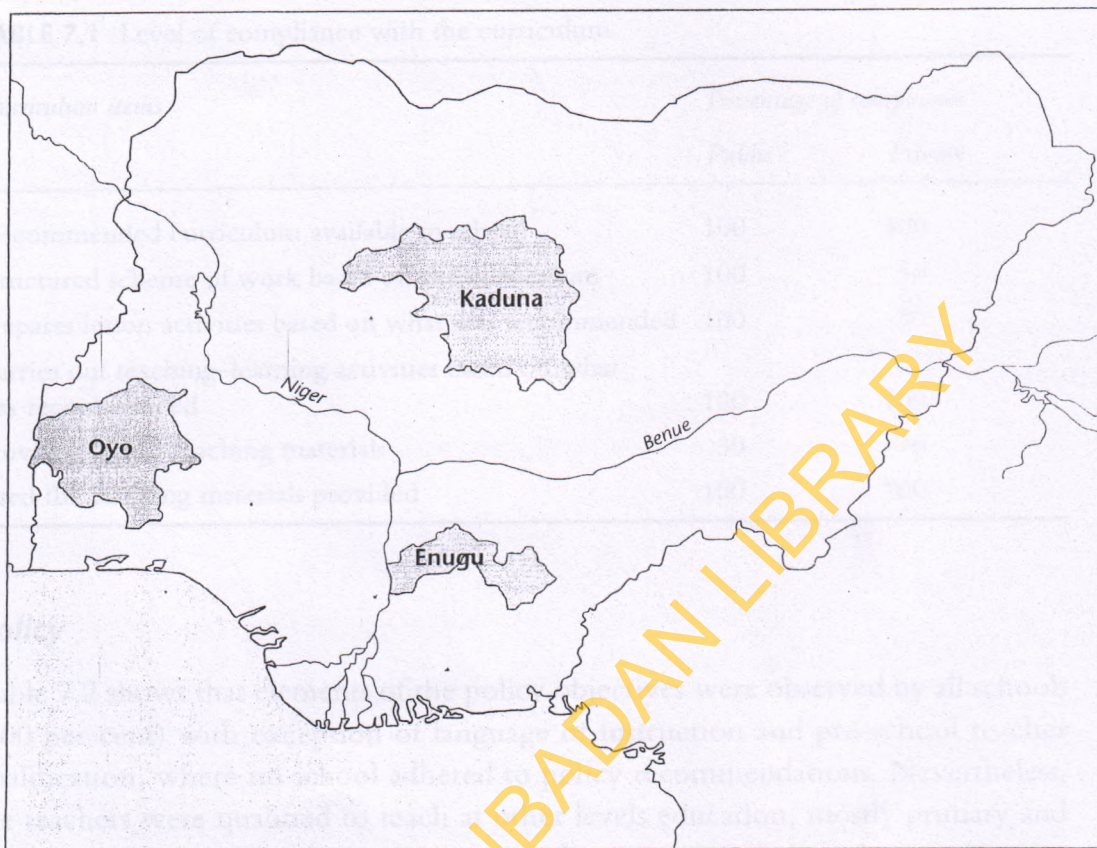
FIGURE 7.1   Map of Nigeria, showing the states where the study sample was drawn from

observed included: introduction to literacy; numeracy; science; and social skills. These subjects were chosen because they are the core subjects taught at pre-schools, considered to aid the learning in other subject areas. Data analysis involved the use of frequency, percentage and graphical illustrations.

Existing government policy documents on ECCE curriculum (e.g. NERDC 2002; FRN 1977–2011) and additional documents from individual private schools were also reviewed and content-analysed.

Results

Curriculum

Table 7.1 shows that the curriculum was adhered to by public schools (100 per cent), but this was not the case with the private sector (50 per cent). A large percentage of pre-schools did not have teaching and learning materials available (30 per cent and 70 per cent for public and private institutions, respectively). However, the materials provided were used during instructional delivery activities (100 per cent). The findings also showed that private pre-school providers have additional subjects included in the curriculum and their scheme of work. These included: computer studies; music; French language; dance (ballet) and swimming classes.

TABLE 7.1 Level of compliance with the curriculum

Curriculum items	Percentage of compliance	
	Public	Private
Recommended curriculum available in school	100	100
Structured scheme of work based on the curriculum	100	50
Prepares lesson activities based on what was recommended	100	50
Carries out teaching–learning activities based on what was recommended	100	100
Provided [with] teaching materials	30	70
Used the teaching materials provided	100	100

Policy

Table 7.2 shows that elements of the policy objectives were observed by all schools (100 per cent) with exception of language of instruction and pre-school teacher qualification, where no school adhered to policy recommendations. Nevertheless, the teachers were qualified to teach at other levels education, mostly primary and secondary. There was no compliance with the recommended teacher–pupil ratio; only 30 per cent of pre-schools had 25 pupils in the class. With regard to classroom environment, 60 per cent of public and 70 per cent of private institutions, respectively, complied. Finally, although there is a policy requirement that government officials in the Ministry of Education should supervise and accredit pre-schools, there is an absence of such functions and lack of government commitment to monitor

TABLE 7.2 Extent of compliance with the policy by schools

Policy items	Percentage of compliance	
	Public	Private
Effects smooth transition	100	100
Preparation for primary school	100	100
Inculcate social values	100	100
Inculcate the spirit of enquiry and creativity	100	100
Develop co-operation and team spirit/Learn good habits	100	100
Teach rudiment[s] of numbers, letters, etc.	100	90
Classroom environment	60	70
Teacher–pupil ratio	30	100
Location	100	100
Schools visited by government officials (before/after opening)	30	60
Teacher qualification	0	0
Language of instruction	0	0

and evaluate the compliance of providers with policy requirements. The language of children's immediate environment was minimally used.

Instructional approaches

Table 7.3 shows that none of the schools visited either used play or allowed the pupils to initiate the activity they were interested in. The table also shows that all teachers (in both public and private pre-schools) were at the centre of the instructional delivery and used direct teaching. The communication flow was usually from the teachers to the pre-schoolers with the pre-schoolers mostly at the receiving end. It is also worth noting that the responses from the pupils, either as a whole class or at individual level, were mere responses to either the teachers' questions or directive remarks.

Direction of communication

Table 7.4 shows that the direction of communication observed was from teacher to group and group to teacher. There were limited interactions at individual level; that is, teacher to pupil or pupil to teacher or towards others.

Classroom context

With respect to classroom context, Table 7.5 reveals that all pre-schools used whole-class teaching, monitoring and transition techniques with minimal small-group

TABLE 7.3 Instructional approaches observed

Instructional approaches	Percentage of compliance	
	Public	Private
Teaches through play	0	0
Teacher-initiated activities	100	100
Pupil-initiated activities	0	0
Direct teaching	100	100

TABLE 7.4 Direction of communication observed

Direction of communication items	Percentage of compliance	
	Public	Private
Teacher to group	100	100
Group to teacher	100	100
Teacher to pupil/Pupil to teacher/group	20	50
Teacher to other teacher/visitor	30	10

TABLE 7.5 Classroom context observed

Classroom context items	Percentage of compliance	
	Public	Private
Whole class	100	100
Small group	30	70
Monitoring	100	100
Transition	100	100
One-to-one	40	80
Non-involved	30	5

activities and one to one interaction, especially in public pre-schools. A large percentage of children were not involved, again, mainly in public pre-schools.

Discussion: what does the evidence tell us?

The impression created from these findings is that there is a wide gap between policy and practice in Nigerian pre-school settings. The findings run contrary to policy requirements which were put in place to achieve the first goal of EFA (Olorunfunmi 2000). These inadequacies may be seen as unexpected, considering that the Nigerian Government has attended most of the global educational conferences, where issues of quality of education have been discussed (NERDC 2002). However, the situation on the ground is explicable when one considers the amount of funds earmarked for the education sector by the Nigerian Government. Issues concerning funding of education in Nigeria have generated many controversies in the country. For instance, in the past decade, the entire budgetary allocation for education has been less than 4 per cent of the total budget, far below what is recommended by UNESCO (2000). This perhaps has contributed to the characteristics of the pre-schools observed.

Most importantly, these types of provision may not augur well for the development of Nigerian children, considering the advantages associated with pre-schoolers' experience of early education and care, prior to their entry into formal schooling. Such advantages include children's effective learning through active interactions with their environment (Vandeyar and Killen 2006); positive relationships between children; children's significant language ability and better mathematical skills (NICHD 2002); children's significant cognitive and social development (Sylva *et al.* 2006).

The results revealed that the observed practice of the pre-school teachers, school administrators, parents and owners emphasised formal learning, especially numeracy, reading and writing, and English language. This could be because pre-school in Nigeria is an important prerequisite for primary school entry, even though entry into primary school should be automatic and compulsory for all Nigerian children of school age, and experience of rigorous formal instruction in pre-school settings is unnecessary.

The interesting thing about the findings is that the differences observed occurred in both government-funded and privately owned pre-schools. For instance, the teachers did not adhere to the prescribed medium of instruction and the class size was larger than was recommended. These practices may not serve well either the learners or the education system. During instruction, it is important to consider the intricate values of using the languages in which both parties (the teacher and pupils) are conversant (Prah 2003), while small classes enable the teacher to have more contact periods with children on a one-to-one basis (Blatchford et al. 2002).

Implications of the findings

These findings have implications about the impact of the pre-school experience on the children's learning and development. Observed implementation of policy and pedagogical practices provides Nigerian pre-schoolers with limited experience of creativity and independence though learner-centred and learner-initiated activities. Teaching the rudiments of numbers, shapes and form, literacy and science skills through play and other types of learner-centred activities are important in inculcating in children the spirit of enquiry, exploration and autonomy. Research has now established that pre-schoolers learn best when they are enabled to construct knowledge through activities, and participation with others in activities, which foster experimentation, problem solving and social interaction.

The findings indicate that there is a need to review and potentially update the curriculum content of teacher preparation and continuing education programmes (in-service and professional support) to include both theory and practice that is appropriate for pre-schools. The aim is to produce teachers who can channel most aspects of their practice towards planning and facilitating learning tasks at both individual and small-group levels, with the children being at the centre stage of the interaction, without delivering monologues; to equip the teachers with skills and competencies in encouraging pupils to initiate activities and participate actively in classroom interactions; and to acquire adequate knowledge in child development and training in associated pedagogical methods that have been identified as important measures of pre-school quality.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the picture painted shows that the Nigerian Government appears not to be ready yet to implement the well-articulated policy and the curriculum content for pre-school education. Quality pre-school provision is well articulated in policy documents, but actual provision is far behind the standards set out. The introduction of pre-school education seems to have caught the Nigerian Government unaware and unprepared, although issues pertaining to this level of education have been on the education agenda since 1969.

It appears that the government and policy makers have found it politically desirable and convenient to start pre-school provision in existing public primary

schools; something that has led to early formal instruction and children's 'schoolifi-cation' (discussed also in Chapter 1). However, further research and feasibility studies are required to ensure the development of infrastructures and instructional materials which are informed by the needs and context of the children, families and communities in Nigeria and the training of pre-school teachers who are familiar with appropriate theories and have the relevant pedagogical skills.

QUESTIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT POLICY AND PRACTICE

1.   Should generating a policy document be an end in itself or a guide to quality compliance?
2.   Should policy statements be politically motivated or a means to national development?
3.   After generating a policy document, does implementation matter?

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