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PROVIDING QUALITY PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD

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Abstract

The major and primary function of all schools is to create and maintain a culture of teaching and learning that is able to develop children's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. In this regard, individual, communal, societal and national development cannot be separated from the quality of basic education which a child receives. In order to realize this basic right, a school has to be a place conducive to harmonious and coordinated education capable of offering high quality programmes. Since the school is a place to realize the rights of children to basic education, this paper therefore discusses quality issues in pre-primary and primary education in Nigeria. It enumerates factors that hinder quality education in both levels of education and what could be done to achieve the desired quality.

Keyword: Pre-primary, primary, quality, learning, development

Word count: 135

Introduction

Education is a means by which we acquire relevant knowledge, skills and increased capacity for work which is required for development. It is the key to individual, societal and national development. In all aspects of the school and its surrounding education community, the rights of the whole child and all children to survival, protection, development and participation are at the centre. This means that education is vital and is capable of making children live happily among others in the society, earn their livelihood and contribute significantly to national advancement. Since education is that important and

beneficial, there has been agitation for more functional and qualitative education all over the world.

The importance of education to developing the individual and nations made the United Nations Organization to come up with goals that all member states should achieve. These include:

- (a) Expansion and improvement of comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- (b) Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- (c) Ensure that the learning needs of young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.

These three goals among other Education for All goals underscore the importance of both pre-primary and primary education and the need to ensure good quality in the provision of education at both levels. This paper therefore addresses the following questions:

1. What is quality in pre-primary and primary education?
2. What are the requirements of good quality pre-primary and primary education?
3. How can we ensure good quality education at these levels of education?

What is Pre-Primary and Primary Education?

Pre-primary education is defined as the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten (FGN, 2004). Pre-primary education in Nigeria is introduced in order to provide young children with necessary stimulation and equal educational opportunities for their optimum development irrespective of their home background (Akinbote, Oduolowu and Lawal, 2001).

Primary education is available everywhere in both the developed and developing countries as well as in the urban and rural areas consequently, it is seen as the most popular level of education in the world. It is an education

given in institutions for children aged six to eleven plus. This level of education fosters inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, effective communication, scientific and reflective thinking, citizenship education, character and moral training, and manipulative skills development among others. The purposes for which these two levels of education are introduced are so much important that the provision is now made compulsory. With regard to early childhood care and education, research shows that high-quality, intensive programmes for low-income children can have lasting positive effects such as greater school success, higher graduation rates, lower juvenile crime, decreased need for special education services later, and lower adolescent pregnancy rates (Camili, Vargas, Ryan and Batnett 2010; Amosun 2000). At the same time, low-quality care can have harmful effects on language, social development, and school performance that are more difficult to ameliorate, especially in schools with fewer resources (Stein, 2010).

Also, the impact of good quality and universal primary education, as the most powerful instrument known for reduction of poverty and inequality, and for laying the basis for faster and sustained economic growth, sound governance and effective institutions had been emphasized (Barbara, Alain and Rainahatra, 2003) among others. These positive effects of pre-primary and primary education should convince us that both levels of education policies and objectives if properly followed will make children to develop, learn and acquire knowledge, skills and attitude to live a useful life. The need to follow the policies and guidelines for these levels of education underscore the importance of quality in pre-primary and primary education.

Quality in Pre-primary and Primary Education

Quality according to Webster dictionary means degree of excellence or something that is of superiority in kind. Quality education means learning standards that someone can get from an institution. These standards can be stratified as being high or low based on the institution and teaching skills there. Quality pre-primary and primary education therefore means a degree of excellence or learning standards that learners can get from pre-primary and primary education.

Thus, when criteria for quality education such as relevant aims of education, good subject balance, good use of the available time, following the stipulated language policy and pedagogic approaches to improve teaching

and learning are followed, quality education will be the consequence. However, it is clear that in Nigeria today, many challenges are confronting both pre-primary and primary education because many of these criteria are not properly followed. As a result, the qualities of these programmes are very low. Some of the challenges facing pre-primary education include accessibility, language issues, and curriculum issues, method of instruction, insufficient facilities, materials and qualified teachers as well as control and supervision issues.

Uwakwe, Falaye, Emunemu and Adelere(2008) while commenting on the problems facing pre-primary education in the South-West Nigeria observed that the rapid multiplication of unregistered and unapproved private schools provide educational services that escape the quality control devices of monitoring organs of the state. They opined that the quality of education provided by many of these private schools is doubtful since they are unrecognized and unregistered schools. The ones that are registered and recognized are located in the capital cities, urban and peri-urban areas where those who could afford them reside. Many of these unregistered private schools are not bound therefore to follow the minimum standard including policy and the curriculum. In a situation where policy, guidelines and implementation strategies are not followed, the quality of such programme will be low (Omotayo, Ihebereme and Maduewesi, 2008). Also there is the perception by some stakeholders that pre-primary education is to provide 'baby sitting' services only at this level of education. This misconception militates against strong education foundations that this level of education is expected to build for Nigerian pre-schoolers.

Moreover, the quality of primary education in Nigeria has not been encouraging, as many products of public schools are half-baked creating serious problem for other levels of education such as secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Some students in post-primary schools have found it difficult to cope academically as a result of inability to speak, read and write properly (Kolawole and Snyder, 2008). This research finding has been corroborated by Abanihe and Babatunde, (2010); Tahir, (2008); and the assessment report of Universal Basic Education (2003) which shows that the learning achievement in Nigerian primary schools is very low. The implication of this is that Nigerian children are being provided with low quality education which is capable of producing lasting negative effects such

as failures, drop-outs, delinquency and social maladjustment all of which are dangerous to peace, security and development of our nation.

Quality Assurance in Pre-primary and Primary Education

Quality assurance is the collection of policies, systems, procedures, and practices internal or external that the organization intends to achieve and maintain in order to enhance the quality of education. It is a process of establishing stakeholders' confidence that input, process and output fulfill expectations. It is the engineering activities implemented in a quality system so that requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled.

In Nigeria, government sets the minimum standards to follow and achieve in terms of policies, guidelines, and aims. Federal Inspectorate Service (FIS) is saddled with the responsibility to inspect and monitor all schools so that inputs, processes and output meet the set standards so as to bring about improvement in teaching and learning in the foundational levels. The following eight components constitute the quality standards set by Nigeria government which both levels of education must strive to provide, maintain and achieve. They are:

(I) Learner achievement and standards (ii) Learners' welfare and participation (iii) Care guidance and support (iv) Leadership and management (v) School community relationship (vi) Learning environment (vii) Teaching and learning (viii) Curriculum and other activities (FGN, 2004)

The Nigeria quality standards are similar to those in the developed countries of the world like Australia where seven national quality standards are set, they are (1) education programme and practice (2) children's health and safety (3) the physical environment (4) staffing arrangements (5) relationship with children (6) collaborative partnerships with families and communities (7) leadership and service management. The implication of the above mentioned standards is that for quality education to be given to Nigerian children, all the policies, procedures, and practices should be recognized, utilized, achieved and maintained.

Attributes of Quality Education

The following are attributes of quality education derived from the national standards which must be put in place in Nigeria system of education.

(I) Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and

learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities.

- (II) Environments that are healthy, safe, protective, and gender-sensitive and provide adequate resources and facilities.
- (III) Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skill for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace education.
- (IV) Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skillful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities.
- (V) Outcomes that encourages knowledge, skills and attitudes and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

Factors leading to Poor Quality Pre-primary and Primary Education

The factors that contribute to poor quality education in pre-schools and primary schools are many and varied. They include lack of leadership and vision, lack of professional learning and development, rigidly implemented routines, poorly resourced or unsafe learning environment and inappropriate teaching practice, managers or educators lack of understanding of what high quality is. Inability of the managers and educators to change practice, interactions that direct and control children, adult-directed activities, and rote learning methods, where adults, decide what children do, and when and how they should do particular activities. Poor quality provision as noted above often results in children: appearing bored and flitting from one activity to the next, hurting or bullying other children, crying or showing signs of being unsettled, trying to learn in a noisy and unsettled environment, high stress levels for both staff and children. The above consequences obviously are not in the interest of Nigeria children's education and life-long learning. There is the need therefore to address problems of quality pre-primary and primary education in Nigeria.

Achieving high quality in pre-primary and primary education

In order to achieve high quality education in both pre-primary and primary education the factors leading to poor quality must be avoided. Apart from that, attributes of good quality education as discussed above must be

strictly followed, good leadership with vision for quality education must be engaged, relationship and interactions with learners should be warm and positive, teaching and learning culture should be created and maintained, assessment and planning must be suitable and purposeful, professional learning and development of the teachers is imperative, qualifications and support of the teachers must be considered, collaboration among stakeholders is necessary and management must take bold steps to change practices that hinder good quality service and programme.

Conclusion

There is no alternative to good quality pre-primary and primary education if the future of our children and Nigeria is to be guaranteed. It is not enough to establish a school or send children to school or teach in a school if the school cannot provide learners with good quality education. It should be noted that quality is an important aspect of education which all stakeholders (home, school, community and government) must provide and make effort to maintain by carrying out their respective responsibilities so that effective teaching and learning could take place.

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