

RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES OF PRIMARY EDUCATION TO THE OVERALL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The study buttresses that primary education is useful to the development of the child and the society at large in various ways. It identifies the family and government as agents that impede the roles of primary education in developing both the child and the society. Recognizing the family and government as barriers against the roles of the primary school towards the development of the child, it recommends that NGO's and government need to sponsor enlightenment programmes to educate the parents and educational managers on the relevance of primary education in the development of the child and society. It also solicited that auxiliary educational bodies at the national and international levels need to liaise with government on how to meet up with funding and other conditions reached during treaties as regards the management and funding of primary education in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Relevance, challenges, primary education

INTRODUCTION

Proper education of the child is a basic tool for effective child upbringing and overall societal development. In recognition of this fact, most nations of the world place much premium on the care and education of the child. Nigeria as a nation at this point in time cannot be credited to have done well in this regard. The author is bold to say so because most government policies and programmes targeted at improving the child's education have not recorded good success. Some such programmes are the regional UPE programmes of 1950's and 60's, 1976 national Universal Primary Education (UPE), the disagreement of who funds and manages childhood education among the tiers of government through the promulgation and abrogation of various National Primary Education Commission decrees between 1988 and 1993. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004a) signed the bill known as the Compulsory Free, Universal Basic Education bill number 66, volume 91. One of the major targets of the bill is to give primary

education the needed attention. Paper documentation in Nigeria does not imply practical implementation of policies and programmes. The case of primary education is no exemption. Indeed there is nothing much to show.

The account rendered in this immediate past paragraph indicates that early childhood education is yet to receive the needed attention in Nigeria. The snobbish disposition of government towards early education of the child targets at making primary education a helpless orphan if not for the efforts of private investors. Considering the lack of enthusiasm demonstrated by government towards primary education and the dominant roles played by the private sector in providing childhood education and the consequential effects one is forced to ask certain questions. Some such questions are:

1. what is primary education?;
2. is primary education relevant to the overall development of the child?;
3. is primary education relevant to the development of the society?; and
4. are their challenges facing primary

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education in contributing towards the overall development of Nigeria?

The scope covered by the questions shall form the basis of this discussion.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

The concept primary education is commonly observed to be an education given to children within their late childhood. This view may justify why the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004b) in her National Policy on Education defined primary education as the education given in an institution for children aged 6 to 11 plus. It went further to explain that the rest of the education system is built upon it and is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. Since mention is made about what happens after primary education there is the need to look at what happens before primary education of the child. It is noted that the education before the child commences primary education is commonly described as 'early childhood education' or pre-school education. Its definition has attracted different interpretations by different people and societies. The perception held by an individual or society determines the practices and the ways early childhood education is organized. In attempt to define early child education, Lawali (2008) conceptually refers to it as the education an individual receives at his earliest years of life. Corroborating the view of Lawali, Odigie (2012) explains that it is the programme of studies providing opportunities for genuine learning to children between the ages of 0-5 years prior to their entering the primary school. The blanket definition as proposed by Lawali and Odigie may mean that it covers the child education from 0-5 years.

In view of this background can one be permitted to say that primary education is best understood to cover the education one receives before entering secondary school or reaching early adolescents? Answers to the immediate last question may have guided Federal Government of Nigeria in 2004 to articulate the goals of primary education to among other things include the following:

1. inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;
2. lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;

3. give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
4. mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;
5. develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
6. give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity; and
7. provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

Source: National Policy on Education of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004b:14

Considering the goals of primary education, it may not be misleading to find out if primary education is indeed relevant to the overall development of the child and the society.

RELEVANCE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION TO THE OVERALL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

Considering that in the immediate past paragraph of this discussion, it has been concluded that primary education is a preparatory ground for the child to acquire basic life skills that would assist the child throughout life, one is forced to determine the ways it contributes towards the child's overall development. This can best be done by cross examining how the primary school system ideally, is expected to actualize its goals or what the achievements of primary education are.

1. **It inculcates permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively:** The child at the primary school level is taught basic arithmetic and language skills. The skills acquired enable him to effectively communicate and transact in the society.
2. **Provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality:** Primary education is a preparatory period for the child to actively participate in the next level of education. Rudimentary skills which will enable the child to cope with basic education are presented to the child considering his physical, social and intellectual abilities. The primary school apart from teaching basic subjects

renders certain services that helps the child to develop the skills that would enable him/her cope with future studies. Some such services are the provision of school library, counseling, Fine arts, Music, Home Economics etc. In addition to this, special periods are created to teach the child some crafts that are locally prepared within the environment. Some such crafts are making of brooms, baskets, ropes and many more.

3. **Mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child:** The primary school is known for imparting societal norms to the children. The extent the school and other social agents do this determines the quality of character or morals the child can exhibit in the larger society. One tool the primary school uses in achieving this is through story telling. Commenting on the use of storytelling, Anero (2013) observes that Plato one of the earliest philosophers and who is accredited as the originator of the use of narratives in teaching children explained that teachers must start with fictitious stories hence children enjoy them more than stories that are non fictitious in nature. Dwelling further on this he noted that Plato stressed the need to use stories to teach natural events that depicts honesty, patience, hard work, respect for elders and those in authority, faith in God and many more.

4. **Give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society:** The development of good leadership and fellowship among people is inculcated in children during their primary school days. The primary school education achieves this by enabling the children develop ways of relating with others in a group by co-operatively sharing and carrying out responsibilities. This is achieved through group assignments and other group activities. Besides, certain rules are made in the classes which sometimes are executed by the class monitor. By so doing, the child begins to learn that within a small community such as the class there is the need to obey laws and respect a leader.

5. **Lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking:** Prime to all school activities is to enable children explore nature, immediate environment, music and art. Basic habits necessary for successful science activities are taught at the primary school level. Some such habits are hygienic practices such as washing of hands before and after meals, toilet habits as well as sleep and rest. Besides these, the primary school child is taught basic science principles

through the teaching and learning of major features of living and non-living things. The child is often asked to carry out experiments to explore nature. For instance seed germination process or determining the best soil for planting is easily carried out by primary school children. It is also worthy to note that the use of play in teaching the primary school child is a means of exploring nature. The use of play in exploring nature gained pronounced attention after Maria Montessori utilized it in training mentally retard children to cope with activities the normal ones can do.

6. **Develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment:** Changes in weather conditions accounting for different seasons are taught at the primary school level. The primary school curriculum goes as far as explaining how the different environments predetermine the nature of economic activities that take place in different areas. By so doing the child is informed in adapting to the different environments.

7. **Give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity:** The primary school as an all round development agent does not neglect the teaching of any aspect of the child's potential. The school achieves it by exposing the child to several skills. Some such rare skills are the games/sports which may not be easily acquired in the home or any other socialization institution.

The succinct presentation of the various ways primary education is beneficial to the overall development of the child may not have been discussed exhaustively. However, it is important to note that the primary school period is an important period in the life of every man. Corroborating this position, Odigie (2003) pointed out that Bloom's taxonomy stated that the rate of intellectual development in people occurs in the following sequence: 0-4 years (50%), 4-8 years (30%) and 8-17 years (20%). If Bloom's assertion is true, it means that a child who receives a haphazard early child education has lost a huge chunk of his intellectual development.

RELEVANCE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

No one can confidently explain what would have been the fate of the child in the modern Nigerian society if there is no childhood education. The Nigerian society is undergoing

economic and family transformation. The economic and family transition has effect on many areas of our national life. One such area is the upbringing of the child. Observation has shown that close relatives in the past assist parents by sharing in the cost of rearing children most especially by rendering maternal supports. Recently, the rate of maternal supports received by nursing mothers is significantly low. A probe into the disengagement of family members is attributed to the emerging economic style of Nigerians. Currently, Nigerians are known to engage in different forms of economic activities that keep them away from homes for long hours. The new economic culture seems to leave parents with the option of sending their children to schools. Primary school education is indeed the hub of societal civilization since members of the society wholly depend on its services for the training and upbringing of her future generations.

The discussion appears to be in general terms but a look at the issue at stake indicates that the Nigerian society derive gains from the services of the primary schools. The relevance of such schools to the Nigerian society can be understood and interpreted from many perspectives.

1. **Economic values:** The extent primary education is of economic significance can be shown through the proliferation and patronage of privately and publicly owned primary schools in Nigeria. The act of enterprising with primary school education generates income for the government, proprietors and teachers as well as other category of staff. On the side of parents, it avails them a safe place where to keep their children thereby allowing them to pursue or engage in their businesses. This view that it allows parents to engage in their businesses warrant Duruamaku-Dim and Anero (2011) to say that parents and guardians who pay do not regret for doing so because the services derived justify the money they pay. The proprietors who run the schools cannot also regret their involvement because of the financial rewards they derive. The government on her part is comfortable because the schools impart skills that would make citizens survive better.

2. **Political values:** The Nigerian political antecedents reveal that one sector where various political eras show interest is primary education. In 1950's and 1960's, the various political regions demonstrated their political will through the declaration of Universal Primary Education (UPE) programmes in their zones. The post

independent era revealed that the 1976 UPE programme was a show of interest on how the government value matters related to primary education in Nigeria. The front sliding and backsliding of government promises through the promulgation and abrogation of National Primary Education Commission (NPEC) decrees speak volumes of the premium attached to primary education by government. Although government may not be described to had improved primary education through the NPEC policies but it was a show of interest. It may not also be out of place to say that the on-going Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme is indeed a show of how Nigerian government values primary education. This statement is made to buttress the fact that the government may indeed be unwilling to fail on matters related to education but may not properly execute the policies and programmes targeted at improving education.

3. **Intellectual or academic values:** The modern Nigerian society is known for adopting a formal approach towards the education of the child. The primary education is the major strategy. Primary schools target at achieving academic excellence through the teaching of several subjects and the provision of many educational services. This is why one of the goals of primary education as contained in the National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) is to inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively. In the bid to attain the goal, it developed well articulated curriculum. This is contrary to the mission schools or African traditional system of education who in the past did not adopt any given standard in carrying its activities. Lack of prescribed standards in handling the day-to-day running of the early mission schools prompted Fafunwa (1974:88) to say that "there was no common curriculum among the missions, each mission and indeed each school within certain missions followed its own devices, based solely on the teacher in charge". The submission as put forward by Fafunwa does not warrant anyone to assume that it was not a veritable tool for the overall human development in the society. One can say that it served the purpose of the colonial needs which was the prime focus of the early education in Nigeria. If the Nigerian child must favorably compete with children from other parts of the world; ruled by knowledge explosion, science and technological advancement the curriculum must be as broad as possible. Primary education has sufficient evidence to show for the

intellectual development of the child. It is observable that a good number of them engage in reflective thinking and thought provoking activities when compared with the Nigerian, child of yester-years or the ones that ignored primary education.

4. **Social values:** The schools are generally known as the custodian of societal values. The foundation laid by the primary schools plays crucial roles in achieving the inculcation of acceptable norms and values of the society. The various rules and regulations introduced in the school enhance the inculcation of acceptable societal norms and values to the Nigerian child. The values instilled in children in such early age hardly depart from them just as the Holy Bible advices that parents should train up their children so that when they grow they will not depart from it. In compliance, the primary schools expose the child to rights and wrongs. They sometimes use some reinforcement measures in the form of rewards and punishments to shape the behavior of the child to reflect acceptable societal values such as honesty, hard work, patience, respect, faithfulness in God and many more.

5. **Philosophical values:** Childhood education posses some elements of philosophical values. The way a society organizes the education of their young ones tells the world about the worth of the child to the society. In the traditional Nigerian society, the way the child is treated or trained is due to some reasons. The rationalization of such reasons is as presented in subsection 5a-d.

a. The child is understood as the biological continuation of the family whether physically strong or weak. This is contrary to the philosophical belief of the ancient Athens society where any child understood not to be strong is thrown into the forest and not cared for. The contradictory view of the ancient Anthens to that of the traditional Nigerian society towards the child is based on the philosophical view that every child in Anthens is a potential soldier. Therefore if the child is weak or sick he cannot serve the purpose and may not be considered very useful to the society.

b. In the typical Nigerian society, the child contributes to the economic and social prosperity of the community. This view justifies why parents easily transfer their vocation, skill or talent to their children.

c. The nature of attention given to the child by the society is based on the belief that the child marks the continuous existence of the society Kisanji (as cited in Grol, 2000). This reason gives

credence to the common saying in most Nigerian communities that the child is not owned by only one person. Therefore, all members of the family and by extension the society contribute their quarters in the upbringing of the child in all ramifications.

d. In all, the modern Nigerian society belief that both the weak and strong should be given equal educational opportunities. This philosophy is as reflected in section I subsection 5c of National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004:7) who said "every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or her ability". This philosophy may justify the move to introduce inclusive education in the school system. Inclusive education is a system where those with different kinds of challenges are taught in the same class with the normal child.

CHALLENGES FACING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

From the on-going no one can argue that primary education is not relevant to the overall development of the child and the society. The accounts rendered so far indicate that primary education greatly contributes to national development. Ideally, one expects that since it is a viable tool for societal growth and development it would have faced minimal problems. Unfortunately, the problems appears to be many thereby obstructing its chances to fully contribute to the betterment of the society. The problems emerge from many sources. The route of such problems can be traced to the teachers, school managers, families, government among others. Considering these sources, the government and the family seem to be responsible to almost all the problems that devastate the primary school system. On this note therefore, this section is dedicated to determine the ways government and the family contribute towards the problems of primary education in Nigeria.

1. **The family:** The acquisition of primary education by the child is dependent on the family. It is the family that presents the child for primary education. Perhaps it is this view that made Ezekiel-Hart and Adiele (2008:7) to say that no matter how highly qualified the teachers are, and no matter how sophisticated the infrastructure, the quality of

preparation given to students (inputs) ... the family plays significant roles in determining the end products of the school system. Until the family is able and willing to perform their roles effectively, not much would be expected from the school in the overall attainment of quality education.

Contrary to the view expressed by Ezekiel-Hart and Adiele the family use the child as an economic tool thereby denying them primary education. Commenting on this, Anero (2010) explains that it may be strange to most people that the child is considered as a tool of economic viability by some parents or families in Nigeria. Indeed some children are so much engaged in economic activities to the extent that they are denied the acquisition of any form of education. In support to this view, Thomas, Abolade and Junaid (2004) explained that most parents know why they keep their children out of school. They explained that they are unwilling to surrender their exploitative strange hold on children whom they use for making money here and now.

Out side the perception that children are used as economic machineries, some families do not also seem to ensure that the children they bring to school are provided with the demands of the educational needs of the 21st century. This is so because some parents have demonstrated unwillingness to provide their children with educational materials needed by their children and wards. Some of the ways the families shabbily attend to the educational needs of their children are:

- a. most families refuse to send children to school at the appropriate age;
- b. some refuse to provide children's educational needs such as books, feeding, school uniforms, transport etc.;
- c. good number of families are unable to follow up children to find out what are their academic challenges in terms of the child's areas of strengths and weaknesses; and
- d. many are guilty of not providing good learning environments through the provision of libraries or reading corners.

2. The government: The government may be accused of being responsible for the challenges

obstructing primary education from being as relevant as possible to the child and the society at large. This view may not be completely correct. However government can be held responsible for committing some fouls. The reckless manner government handles issues related to primary education justifies the statement made by Anero (2011) who describes government as being political, only a policy maker, a powerless supervisor and squander of meaningful programmes targeted at improving the services rendered by the primary school subsector. The view that government is not meaningfully committed to demonstrate sagacity and doggedness in implementing policies and programmes to improve primary education has many proves. Some such prove is the inability of the colonial government to promptly redeem their pledge by failing to issue grants-in-aids to the missionary schools within 1842-1872. The failure of the regional Universal Primary Education (UPE) programmes in the 1950's -1960's due to poor funding. The problems created as a result of the failure of the 1950's/1960's Universal Primary Education lingers in the minds of most educators as a monumental set back towards the development of primary education in Nigeria because the problems still hunt the success of primary education in Nigeria. Some such problems are overcrowded classrooms, quality of teachers, instructional materials, funding and many more. The 1976 national UPE programme did not escape the experiences of the regional UPE programmes in terms of funding and provision of facilities. The inconsistency and disagreements among the different tiers of government on who funds and manages primary education within the late 1980's to the 1990's injected some degree of deficiency in the system. In all, the government is known for epileptic financial support to primary education and none implementation of treaties targeted at improving primary education even when they participate in signing such agreements. Examples of such treaties as reported by Federal Government of Nigeria (2000) are the Jointem declaration and framework for Africa on Education for All (1990), New Delhi (1991) declaration on E-countries, the Dakar (2000) Education for All (EAF) forum among others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings recorded in this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and government need to sponsor enlightenment programmes to educate the parents on the relevance of primary education to the child and societal development and explain the dangers of using the child as an economic tool as well as the need to provide the enabling environment that will enable the child acquire primary education; and

2. auxiliary educational bodies at the national and international levels such as Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), United Nations Children's Education and Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) need to liaise with government on how to meet up with funding and other conditions reached during treaties.

CONCLUSION

No doubt primary education serves as the hub of individual and societal development in Nigeria and other places of the world. Considering its multidimensional roles, parents, teachers, government and other stake holders must be prepared to take their responsibility serious. Unfortunately the parents or the family and the government which constitute the concern of this study cannot be deemed to have credibly carried out their functions. The parents are blamed for engaging their children in economic ventures rather than providing them the needed facilities to carry out their studies. In the same vein government cannot escape being blamed for poor funding and quashing of educational treaties which would have improved the primary school system. Therefore, if the primary school must live up to expectations, the family and the government must be up and doing.

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