

HARNESSING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR QUALITATIVE LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education in the 21st Century is a basic need. Interestingly, many people perceive education as a right of both children and adults. As regards the issue of quality delivery, the foundation level of education is crucial anywhere in the world. In Nigeria, the educational system has witnessed a catalogue of changes in policies and programmes. Some of the changes had appeared to a number of people as desirable while one continues to wonder why some of the other changes were ever initiated. This had resulted in series of policy somersaults and disruption of academic calendars at all levels of learning throughout the country. Worst hit by all these is the pre-primary level of education where there is no visible government involvement whether in supervision, inspection or funding. The greatness of any nation is to cultivate a deliberate policy that would bring about an enduring legacy for her children often regarded as “the leaders of tomorrow”. One sure way of safe guarding that desirable legacy for the tender mind is through exposure to reading and enactment of stories from literature especially national literature. This kind of literacy experiences is indeed critical to children's personal development. It is against this background that the paper explored potentiality of harnessing children's literature in Early Childhood Education for qualitative learning in Nigeria. It also identified challenges against harnessing children's literature in early childhood education in Nigeria. The paper concluded that reading begets inspiration for taking informed decisions. It was recommended that the importance of children's literature in our national life should not be treated with levity.

Introduction

Naturally, we have early childhood (birth to about 5 years), mid childhood (6 to about 18years) phases of children's growth and development. Scientists agree that the early childhood stage of life is crucial to all round development of any human being. In this regard, Awakel (2004) asserted that “studies indicate that early childhood is a critical time for developing the brain functions necessary to handle information, express emotions normally and become proficient in language”. The form of education given to a child at this phase of development is called early childhood/pre school/pre-primary education.

At this stage, a child's health, intellect, personality, character,

emotional stability, to mention a few, is molded. Hence, the necessity of adopting adequate/appropriate teaching methods in teaching children in the first five years of life is incontrovertible. Like young plants, children develop and thrive when nurtured with regular, loving attention. Water and sunlight nourish a young plant and stimulate healthy and stable growth. By the same token, a child who is showered with verbal and physical expressions of love/training would enjoy stable mental and emotional growth. Some child-development scholars have indentified and associated these types of early childhood training with counselling. Perhaps, this is because teaching involves some level of counselling. Infact, they conceptualize counselling as a process in which one

person (a teacher or a child minder or even a parent) assists another person (a child) in a person- to –person or face-to-face encounter (Eduwen, 1994; Aluede, Mc Eachern & Kenny, 2005). They further posit that this assistance might take many forms: it might be vocational, social, recreational, emotional and/ or moral. Whatever form it would take, the idea of “play” is central when it comes to early childhood training. This was probably why the National Policy on Education (2014) in Nigeria stressed the deployment of the “play” concept in the passing of instructions to pre-schoolers/pupils at the primary school level of education. It recommended that early childhood education facilities provided must ensure that the main method of teaching at this level should be through play. Through play, a child learns rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, among others.

Unfortunately, some pre-primary education sector in Nigeria are not organized and the few agencies/organizations that currently run pre-primary education facilities operate without putting the tender age of the children into consideration. The children are constantly exposed to materials that are far beyond their abilities and capabilities.

To worsen the issue, the government does not even play the critical supervisory role it ought to play at this level of education. In this regard, the communiqué of the national forum for policy development workshop on National Education Reforms (2007) noted that at this level, there is no government involvement in supervision and funding. Children aged between 2 and 5 years who should be in school at the pre-primary education level are about

sixteen (16) million but only 1 million are in school representing 6.25%.

Though the primary, post primary and tertiary levels of education receive some attention, the negative rub off from the pre-primary level which is the foundation tends to adversely affect learning activities at these other higher levels of education. Besides, the inconsistencies in educational policies and programmes had also taken its toll on the educational infrastructure in Nigeria. This might have informed the lamentation of Aluede (2006) that the many changes in educational policies in Nigeria are products of confusion. There is therefore a high level of uncertainty which is beclouding meaningful planning in Nigeria's educational system. This could be dangerous particularly as the future of Nigeria and Nigerians would ultimately be determined by the level of education it has acquired. However, the paper is primarily concerned with the foundation level of education which is usually called the pre-primary or early childhood education sector in Nigeria.

Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Early childhood education is designed for preschoolers or those children who are not up to primary school age in Nigeria. Asaya, Ehigie and Igbino ghene (2006) assert that it is the education which is given in an educational institution to children aged 2 to 5 plus prior to their entering the primary school. Although this assertion is to a great extent, consistent with that of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2014) in Nigeria, some pre-primary education facility providers admit less than 6-month old children into their schools. Infact, there are basically three

forms of pre-primary education in the Nigerian context. These are the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten (NPE, 2014). It might not be superfluous if we briefly examine them.

The crèche is a pre-school facility which provides care and support services for tender children while their parents or guardians are at work. It also designates a place where small children are looked after while their parents or guardians are at work. It also designates a place where small children are looked after while their parents are working or busy with other tasks (Encarta, 2009). In many areas in Nigeria, the typical working hours are from 8:00am to 4:00pm or 8:00am to 2:00pm and pre-schoolers are taken care of during these periods at the crèche depending on the needs of the parents or the services and policies of the pre-school facility providers. Most of the crèches in Nigeria are run by churches, consortia and other private individuals who seldom employ teachers in early childhood education but are all out to make profit.

The nursery is a pre kindergarten school for children between the ages of three and five. Asaye, Edigie and Igbino ghene (2006) affirm that nursery schools are generally credited with being more educational than child care centres. In Nigeria, nursery programmes done by government are not enough to cater for the larger populace. Besides, these pre school facilities operate at the whims and caprices of the owners who might not be abreast with best global practices in that level of education.

The kindergarten type of pre-school in Nigeria is sometimes interchangeably used with the nursery school. However, it essentially means a school or class for

young children, usually between the ages of four and six, immediately before they begin primary education. Practically, some kindergartens in Nigeria are owned by individuals while some are owned by the government. Besides, the dangerous trend of pushing small children too hard, too fast to grasp concepts at the nuisance of unqualified and inexperienced teachers in most of these educational centres, the learning environment which is called the third teacher in the Reggio Emilia schools (Gandim, 2002), is hardly put into consideration in Nigeria. This is against the backdrop of the fact that researches indicate that the physical environment of pre-schools has an important influence on the education and development of children are resonating globally (Greenman, 1988). However, the purpose and philosophy underpinning pre-primary education spelt out by the NPE in Nigeria (FRN, 2004) might be outlined as follows:

- a. To effect a smooth transition from the home to the school.
- b. To prepare the child for the primary level of education
- c. To provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farm, in the markets, offices etc)
- d. To inculcate social norms.
- e. To inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and playing with toys etc.
- f. To develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit.
- g. To learn good habits, especially good health habits
- h. To teach rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play.

At this pre-primary level, the child

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

Harnessing Children's Literature in Early Childhood Education for qualitative learning in Nigeria

Children's literature, characterized by essential ingredients such as education enlightenment and morals is integral to the social transformation of a nation. To this end, children's literature occupies a pertinent position in the socio-cultural and socio-political sphere of a nation. Hence, its primary target is the young minds, who are widely believed to be the "future leaders". In essence, children's literature according to Umukoro (2002) educate and influence "the tender mind" to respond appropriately to the challenges or exigencies of life as often captured in their stories. These challenges could be environmental, psychological or spiritual. However, the hall mark of this literature is character or personality molding through participation.

David in Umukoro (2002) rightly posits that "it helps the personality to self-realization by educating the emotions, stimulating the intellect and coordinating to the wishes of the mind and spirit". Thus, the young minds would grow both intellectually and physiologically to become responsible adult members of their society. The stories and activities ascribed to children's literature are two folds: first, the old folk stories preserved orally and second, the modern stories of adventure and human preoccupations encapsulated in literary texts. One can trace children's literature back to the stories and songs, part of a wider oral tradition that adults shared with children before publishing existed" (Wikipedia, 2013).

In many cultures, the history,

customs and other values of the society are conveyed to children amidst entertainment. Folktales, legends, myths or what is commonly known as the "why" stories often tried to explain the origin of certain phenomena and help broaden children's horizon about the world. In several Nigerian cultures for examples, there exist folktales such as why the sky is so far away from the earth; why the rainbow appears in the sky; how the leopard got its spots or why you should not sit on (Wikipedia 2013). All these stories possess acculturation tendencies and objectives. It is pertinent to define children's literature. Some broadly define children's literature as anything that children can read, while others specify it as fiction, nonfiction, poetry or drama intended for and used by children or young people (Wikipedia 2013). Gbileka (1997) also define children's literature as all books written for children, excluding works such as comic books, joke books, cartoon books and nonfiction works that are not intended to be read from front to back such as dictionaries, encyclopedias and other reference materials. Gbileka (1997) sees children's literature as all literature written or told to the very young-fairy tales, nursery rhymes, songs, school stories, adventure stories, family stories, legends, myths and so on. Umukoro (2014) sees children's literature as the totality of literature including the three genres of drama, prose and poetry specifically prepared, not only for the enjoyment of children but also for their positive upbringing. According to Nwahunanya (2007), many critics are of the opinion that children's literature had been relegated to the background for too long.

In order to ensure that these children become beneficial to the society and to their parents, there is need for inclusion of literature in their curriculum, employ qualified literature teachers, make available reading materials and make sure that these children read literature books and also monitor the

quality of literature that they read. While a child should be encouraged to read, the child should be encouraged to read only the literature designed for children, example, Pamper him to Death by Felicia Nneka Afuba (2013); Ugly Duckling by Lynne Bradbury (1982); Chike & the Village Masquerades by Paulie C. Okoli-Iduh (2011).

Good Children's Literatures Possess the Following Qualities.

It has to be didactic. Children's literature is such that should be geared towards passing morals. Any good literature for children should help them to live a morally pure life. for example, A Jewel of Great Price by Okafor Chisom (2013).

Major characters of children's literature are mainly children. It is an obvious fact that children are interested in what happens to other children. This is why they are always inquisitive about the others' affairs. The essence of literature is to communicate the reader and that is why it is believed that literature is a mirror of life. Example, Chattered Dream by Olerule Ibukwunolu Isaac (2011)

The diction of children's literature is relatively simple. Diction means the choice and use of words in a literary work. A writer of children's literature should consider his language. A child should be encouraged to read literature whose language is simple. The simplicity of the language of a literary work would make the child to appreciate the work.

The plot is linear and devoid of so many conflicts. Plot, is the sequence of incidents or events of which a story is composed. Plot has beginning, middle and end.

Characterization is usually direct and the number of characters, few. Characterization are fictional people used by the writer to tell his or her story. In a good work of art, fictional characters are used to symbolize real

people in real life. The characters that feature so prominently in a work of art are major characters. For example, Bisi goes to School by Ifeanyi Ofoegbuna (2007).

Challenges against Harnessing Children's Literature in Early Childhood Education in Nigeria.

There are some challenges militating against harnessing children's literature in Early Childhood Education. Some of these challenges include the following.

Poor Reading Culture: Children these days lack enthusiasm towards reading. They rather prefer to watch films for hours. The culture of reading is therefore gradually dying away in our children. This of course, no doubt, affects the harnessing of children's literature in Early Childhood Education.

Non Availability of Literary Reading Materials: Literary reading materials are in short supply. Where they are available, they are not affordable.

Non Availability of Qualified Literature Teachers: Qualified literature teachers, who can effectively see that there are provisions of reading materials, see that children read literature books and also monitor the quality of literature books they read, are not readily available. This hampers the harnessing of children's literature in Early Childhood Education.

Conclusion

The notion that "Leaders are readers" underscores the importance of children's literature in our national life. Reading begets inspiration for taking informed decisions. We are in the 21st century, the era of technology, the period some people refer to as the period of "anything goes". For example, these days it is a herculean task to separate children from activities such as video games, mobile phone chatting; internet browsing; watching movies on TV or

their favourite European clubs on television such as Chelsea and Manchester United. Many adults have joined the band wagon jostling over the same things.

Coupled to this situation, with other challenges of globalization, concerted effort must be made to resuscitate children's literature programme. In many government schools in some parts of the north, literature is not even taught as a subject in both pre-primary and primary schools. This situation, if not quickly addressed, would spell danger for the future. Workable plans of actions should be taken to use literature as a yardstick for children's total development. Finally, the paper concludes that reading begets inspiration for taking informed decisions.

Recommendations

The importance of children's literature in our national life should not be treated with levity. There is need to create a legislation that would ensure the teaching and learning of literature in all Nigerian schools.

The Federal Government, through the office of the First Lady, should create a biannual children's literary festival with prizes for best children's texts, reading and acting. This would not only encourage unity but also elicit the spirit of nationalism.

Workshops should be organized for teachers already in the field to make them conversant with the reading materials for the pre-school children.

Federal and State Ministry of Education should undertake and sponsor the production of quality literature books for pre-primary school children and make them available to the children even in the remote areas. This will make such children develop interest in literature books.

It also recommends that the importance of children's literature in our national life should not be treated with levity.

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