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Evaluation of Curriculum Aspects of Early Childhood Education Programme in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examined the curriculum contents of early childhood education programme in Nigeria. Areas focused on were the curriculum contents, implementation strategies, materials put in place for implementing the curriculum and transition rate of Nigeria children from nursery classes to primary school. Issues that centred on discrepancies between curriculum recommendation and level of implementation were looked into. The paper also considered it necessary to shed light on the key concepts used in this study such as evaluation, curriculum, as well as early childhood education programme. Classroom Interaction Instrument (CII), interview schedules, documentary analysis and observation technique were used to generate information. Two hundred and fifty early teachers and 35 head teachers provided information needed for the study. Data analysis involved the use of qualitative method. The result revealed that learning is integrated across the development needs, however, with less emphasis on learning experiences (without recognizing differences in individual children's learning styles), prior experiences and different development rates. The curriculum implementers are expected to help as much as possible, ensure that children's individual differences are considered during teaching-learning processes. Material provision should be central to early childhood classroom activities. Further, the use of play and not lecture method should be the prevailing teaching strategy used.

Keywords: curriculum, preschool, instructional methods, teaching aids, discrepancy evaluation.

Introduction

Curriculum in an education system comprises all teaching-learning activities which learners are exposed to that could lead to desired behaviour changes in the learner. These activities are usually planned or guided by the school. Such activities could be carried out on groups of learners or individual learners, inside or outside of the school. It is expected that in any education setting, there should be curriculum in place to determine the minimum standard every provider of that service would adhere to. The curriculum for pre-school children should reflect the principles of early childhood education practices bearing in mind best practices (teaching method, conducive environment, material provision, child centred learning, among others). The process of curriculum development should evolve considering that children and the environment they live in are always changing.

However, during such changes in curriculum, stakeholders should carry out need assessment of the would-be beneficiaries, taking into consideration the learner's immediate environment, instructional objectives, learning experiences the school programme should offer, learning contents and learning materials to use, best teaching methods to employ, organisation of the learning experiences and expected learning outcomes. Learning is expected to be integrated across the developmental needs of the child, taking cognizance of learner's individual differences, learning styles, prior experiences, and developmental rates, among others.

The Nigerian pre-school curriculum is expected to provide a continuum for learning in the primary level and beyond focusing on literacy, numeracy and social life skills, and also emphasis on the extra-curricular activities since these are parts of the objectives of starting off this level of education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, FRN 2004). Thus, the early childhood curriculum should be planned to ensure all round development of the Nigerian child (cognitive, physical, emotional and social needs). Emphasis should be on a curriculum content that is contemporary, and connected with everyday lives of these children. Reforms introduced under the Federal Government's National education policy (FRN, 2004) explicitly recognize the importance of introducing Nigeria pre-school child to early years education. A parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Education known as National Educational Research Development Council (NERDC, 2002) was established to cater for

issues pertaining to when Nigeria child should be exposed to school-like environment, who should be responsible for their care and concern and what kind of experiences children will be exposed to. This organisation was set up to ensure that the experiences provided for young children in Nigeria are in line with what is globally acceptable and also ensure that such experiences are uniform across school types and locations.

The establishment of pre-primary school is no longer in the hands of private individuals and group alone. The Nigerian government now takes part in its provision and is saddled with the responsibility of regulating, reviewing and enforcing educational laws relating to the establishment of such schools. However, irrespective of this fact, there has been upsurge in the number of unregistered pre-school institutions today with variances in names and activities carried out (Odinko, Williams, and Donn, 2009). The majority of such activities are classroom-based, while a few are organised for custodians functions. The various kinds in existence include: Day care centres, child minders, play groups, Kindergarten, Nursery, to mention but a few. It may not be easy for one to differentiate among pre-school programmes in Nigeria because one is never completely sure that two pre-school centres described in different term (Montesorian or Froebian) are in fact different in implementation. Pre-school programmes are provided in public and private institutions. This usually involves a one-year 'pre-school' or 'kindergarten' programme for three-to four-year-olds or four-to five-year-olds, followed by a one year 'preparatory' for four-to five-year-olds or five-to six-year-olds as the case may be (Odinko and Williams, 2006). There tend to be differences in their modus operandi; thus, the need to evaluate the activities of the service providers.

Evaluation is a process of generating information, assigning numerical values to such information, analyzing such information, putting them into interpretable forms and passing value judgment on such information (usually referred to as data) to guide decision making. In any organization, there are basic objectives for setting it up. There are usually tendencies that what is expected may not tally with the actual programme outcomes. For this study, Provus (1971) discrepancy evaluation model was used. Using this evaluation model involved comparing what should be (early childhood programme plans or intentions and actual programme operations, standard and

objectives and goals set by the Nigerian government for this level of education) with what is, for the purpose of ascertaining whether the providers of this service are meeting up with the requirements of the objectives and demands of the curriculum. Thus, emphasis was laid on identifying demands of the curriculum, with respect to set standard for implementing the components of early childhood curriculum (input, process, and output) by service providers of Nigerian pre-school programme in order to improve teaching and learning efficiency in this level of education.

Evaluation data generated could provide the empirical basic for adjusting, improving or discarding some specific/general objectives of the curriculum. Thus, evaluation in this study will be seen as a process of ascertaining the areas (objectives), selecting related information, collecting and analyzing information generated to find out if the expected changes (aims/objectives of setting up such programme) did occur, the present level of achievement of recommended standard in different aspects of the programme. The second aim then is to pass value judgment with a view to correcting, improving or changing some aspects of the programme that are in complete deviation from the standards. How much of these laudable curriculum and policies are obeyed or adhered to judiciously by the practitioners has not been looked into by Nigerian researchers in early childhood. The foregoing underscored the need to focus a study that would evaluate the level of compliance with the laid down rules by providers of pre-school services. Thus, evaluation questions such as these will be provided answers to:

1. What is the government's policy on early childhood?
2. What is the actual programme recommendation by the government with respect to:
 - i. availability of Early Childhood curriculum provision;
 - ii. balance across the curriculum;
 - iii. principles underpinning the curriculum;
 - iv. teaching methods to use;
 - v. teaching aids;
 - vi. grouping method;
 - vii. age of transfer to compulsory education;
 - viii. forms of assessment,
 - ix. how children with special needs are identified;
 - x. nature of record keeping;

- xi. quality assurance funding and teacher-pupil ratio); and
 - xii. teacher qualification;
3. Are there discrepancies between the intended and the actual programme operations?

Methodology

Population and Sample

The target population comprised Nigeria pre-school children aged 3 to 5+ , residing in the three selected states of the country (Enugu, Oyo and Kaduna) and currently enrolled in preschool institutions (Nursery 1,2,3), their class teachers and school heads. The sample consisted of 72 preschools randomly selected from public and private service providers in urban and rural locations in these states. From each school selected, three preschool teachers (representing each preschool grade) and the head teachers were chosen to participate. In all, 216 early childhood teachers and 72 head teachers constituted the study sample.

Instruments

Classroom Interaction Instrument (CII) was used to record instructional delivery behaviours and activities of teachers and the learners, interview schedules for information on the teachers. Lessons were observed for thirty minutes. Existing documents on ECCDE curriculum (NERDC, 2002; FRN, 2004), as well as those from individual private schools, teachers' lesson notes, diary and scheme of work used by the teachers were analyzed. The method used for establishing the reliability estimate was the Scott's (1955) coefficient formulae also known as Scott's pie cited in Okpala and Onocha (1995). The reliability estimate ranged to .88 to .93

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

To establish whether the providers are adhering to the policy, recommendation required that the researcher would need to generate data on details of implementation through systematic observation of teaching-learning process in the classrooms, interview teachers and analyze documents (school diaries, curriculum in use, lesson notes, among others). Thus, schools were visited and information generated from official documents. Further,

teaching-learning activities were observed to ascertain how the curriculum was interpreted and implemented. Data analysis involved the use of qualitative indices. As a result, verbatim reports of information generated early childhood education formed the prevailing reporting format.

Results

The Government Policy on Early Childhood

In Nigeria, early child education also referred to as pre-primary education is viewed as the education given in an educational institution to Nigerian children from birth to 5+ prior to their entering the primary school. This level of education is viewed as a process of giving Nigerian children within this age bracket intellectual headstart. The objectives of establishing this level of education according to Nigerian government include: to effect a smooth transition from home to the school, preparing Nigerian child for the primary level of education; to inculcate social norms, spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and the local environment; to teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, through play; and to teach good habits, especially good health habit, among others (FRN 2004, p. 11, section 13 a-e). Pre-primary education is now free and a compulsory level of education which every Nigerian child should pass through before normal schooling begins.

The actual programme recommendations by the government with respect to:

Is there an early childhood curriculum?

The study revealed that Pre-School curriculum guidelines which are based on foundation learning areas (language skills-English language studies, Nigeria languages, science, social studies, arts, among others) exist. This aims at providing basic foundation for the primary level since they reflect on the content of the components of the primary school curriculum, in conjunction with other components (teaching methods, learning processes, assessment of learning outcomes). The key components of the pre-school curriculum guidelines as was observed in this study are not based on the principles of early childhood curriculum which acknowledges

the individuality of children with regard to their unique psychological state, their development, their family and cultural experiences, and their skills and interest. For instance, teachers are advised to structure their materials on the basis of their immediate environments but it was observed that foreign materials formed the bulk of the teaching aids and reference materials used.

Further, issues that border on children's individual social and cultural contexts; building partnerships (involving children in planning, collaborating with children, parents and other professionals); establishing a flexible learning environment (providing choice, providing a resource quality interaction were not taken into account by practising teachers as well as the policy makers. The learning experiences the pre-schoolers were exposed to include:

- **Mathematical Skills** under which Nigerian pre-school children are exposed to counting of numbers, identification of number symbols, comparison of lengths and height, comparison of volume, weighing, playing at marketing, simple addition and subtraction using number symbols, writing of numbers, days of the week, among others;
- **Creative Arts** in which the contents include scribbling, drawing and painting, shading, singing, dancing and simple drama, Making things such as paper boats, beads, boats, collages, picture books, brooms, drama, mats, baskets, painting, modeling and drawing, Simple drama, Constructing things from blocks, plastics, sticks, boxes, cartoons, etc. and Learning songs, dancing styles;
- **Scientific and Reflective Thinking** in which the following are taught: living and non-living things, types of soil, simple experiments, machines);
- **Language and Communication Skills-** Play at home corner, recognition and making of colours and objects, rhymes and songs, recognition and tracing of alphabets, scribbling and making patterns, listening skills, speaking skills, reading skill, writing skills;

- **Social Norms in which** learning social habits, Toilet and dressing habits, interaction with peers, knowing about self and ones' family, school, cultural dances, songs and games, Learning to take turns; learning to use social accepted expressions are taught;
- **Physical and Health Education** Simple health habits, Physical exercise, Gross Skills, Good health habits

Subjects Observed in Schools Time Tables

It was observed that in some schools, English language studies is referred to language and communication skills, whereas in some , it is subdivided into several components: phonics, literature in English, grammar, news, speech, drama, writing, among others. Mathematics is referred to as numbers in some schools and as Mathematics in others; social norms is referred to as social studies while other subjects are as referred to in the recommended subjects by the government.

Discussion

The contents listed signify that perhaps, if the organizers of ECCE programmes in Nigeria structure the programme of activities very well, any Nigerian child who passes through pre-school should be able to exhibit such behaviours as being emotionally prepared for normal schooling in terms of adjusting to another environment outside of the child's home. Further, the children should be able to express themselves clearly, recite rhymes, and retell stories, make-up their own stories and be able to provide answers to questions within their competence when asked. In addition, the children should also be able to use writing tools and materials correctly, identify letters of the alphabet in both small and capital forms, show interest in looking at picture books and narrating what they see, differentiate and identify pictures, objects, shapes, colours, count freely up to each child's level of ability as well as be able to recognize number symbols. Also, they should be able to adjust to social habits of the society including obedience, kindness, honesty and fair play, know how to use the toilet, and know what to do when they take ill before normal schooling begins at age six. How much of these laudable curriculum and policies are obeyed or adhered to judiciously by the practitioners has not been looked into by Nigerian

researchers in early childhood. The foregoing underscores the need to focus a study that should evaluate the level of compliance with the laid down rules by providers of pre-school services.

The Balance across the Curriculum

Nigerian children are exposed to curricular contents which are years ahead of their maturity. In other words, children who are 4yrs old are exposed to experiences meant for 5 years old (i.e. texts meant for 5 years old are used by 4 years old). Thus, educational content at this stage is organized around areas of experience relating to children's development. Learning is divided into specific areas of knowledge (subjects). The pre-school educators are therefore expected to itemize specific objective they intend learners to achieve after being exposed to any particular topic in any subject areas to ensure that the children derive the optimum benefit or that they attained mastery of each new experience.

The type of experiences expected of Nigerian children to acquire during the first three years of their development (from birth to three years) include those of psychomotor, control of the body, initial speech development (through songs and rhymes), among others. The second stage (nurseries 2 to 3) stresses the intellectual, social, physical, emotional development (reading, writing, speaking, listening) development of positive and stable self-image and acquisition of habits that are acceptable to the members of the child's immediate community and the Nigerian society as a whole. It was observed that there was a formal timetable for this stage in all the classes used because of fragmentation of learning experiences into subject areas.

The Principles Underpinning this Curriculum

The general principle underpinning the curriculum recommended is to enable Nigerian children who were exposed to preschool education adapt easily in school-like environment during the compulsory primary level and beyond. General pre-school programmes are planned to reflect children's interest and intellectual, social, emotional and physical needs. Learning is integrated across subject, without flexible learning experiences that recognize individual children's learning style, prior experiences and deferring rates of development. In the preparatory year (the compulsory year before the start of primary education), the focus is

on the overall development of the child and the curriculum is linked to the primary curriculum. Learning experiences are based on the skills children bring to school and are built around literacy, mathematics, physical skill, and personal social skills in preparation for primary level of education

Teaching Method Recommended as revealed by the documents include the use of:

- Demonstration, observation, discussion, simple drama, direct teaching, allowing children to collect pictures of animals, birds, insects and fish.

Teaching Methods Observed

The results of the observations reveal that teachers in Nigerian pre-primary classrooms tend to spend a larger percentage of their lesson times (44.4%) interacting (prompting learning) with the whole class (e.g. writing on the chalkboard, explaining, questioning, giving directives, distributing textual/writing materials.) whereas lower percentage of the lesson time (17.2% and 13.1%) was spent on learning-facilitating activities that centred on groups of pupils (e.g. whole class reciting, giving chorus response, reading, counting, and identifying) and on one-to-one/individual pupil activities (e.g. individual child reading, copying from the chalkboard, reading, counting, writing a given class task with the teacher monitoring respectively). However, a good percentage of the lesson time (24.0%) was spent on teacher/student non-facilitating learning behaviour (e.g. teacher talking most of the times, punishing, grading pupils work, using negative reinforcement, teaching without instructional materials) while the remaining of the lesson time (1.3%) was spent on confusion (e.g. class disorganized, children wandering aimlessly, children fighting). The direction of communication during teaching from teacher to pupils (43.6 % from teacher to group and 18.4% from teacher to individual pupils). The direction of communication from pupil to teacher accounted for 36.8% (group to teacher, 21.1% and pupil to teacher, 15.7%) of the total communications whereas, less than 1.0% of the communications represented teacher communications with others (for instance visitors, teachers and pupils from other classes). Play method and use of instructional materials were minimally used.

However, teachers are expected to collect specimens of living and non-living things for observation, discussion, classification, identification of the characteristics of non-living things, and to show results of experiments and explain to children. Teachers are also expected to teach children how to sort objects according to colours and shapes; provide objects for counting; use games, songs and rhymes that encourage the counting; encourage tracing, drawing and writing of numbers; encourage children to measure length and heights; ask questions of how many/much; familiarize the children with Nigerian currency; prepare a good market shopping corner in the classroom; assist children in identifying colours, objects, letters of the alphabet; teach cultural dances, songs, and games; create opportunities for children to exhibit the behaviours; encourage children to: listen to different sounds, talk about things, converse with peers, participate in drama, tell stories, identify names, associate pictures with words, play with jigsaw-puzzle, match shape/objects with names, control writing tools, left-to-right orientation, top-to-bottom orientation, form patterns, write lower and upper case letters, among others.

Teaching Aids Recommended

The result also revealed that the teacher aids recommended for use during instructional delivery were:

- The school ground, science corner to be stocked with specimens of animals, plants, birds, insects, fish.
- Charts, provide real life objects, science/nature corners, number cards, beads, bead frames, bottle tops, used matches sticks, seeds, counting sticks, wood cubes, etc.
- Picture-matching cards showing one-to-one correspondence, measuring tapes, buckets, cups, bowls, water, sand, sawdust, charts, diagrams, calendars, simple mathematics books, number cards, etc.
- Nursery rhyme books, picture books, chalkboard, crayons, paints, pencils, chinks, large wall pictures, beads, cowries shells, egg shells, glue, drum, gongs, tambourines, clothes, jewellery, shoes, bags, etc; bottles, radios, tape recorder, method rhymes and jingles; picture frieze, picture books

with captions, labels which children can identify, language games, writing materials, puzzles, variety of play materials, folklores, folktales, local songs, games, dances, inviting people to talk/teach children; project and practical displays. Out-door play equipment; toilets, washing hand basins, soap, towel, etc.

Teaching Aids Observed

The instructional materials that featured most prominently in all the classrooms used were chalkboard (100%), followed by the official syllabuses/curricular (94.4%) and availability of pupils, text and workbooks (88.8%) while only 37.5% of the classrooms had flash cards (27.7%), 20.8 had alphabet blocks, geometric shapes and counting frames respectively, whereas only 9.4% and 4.1% of the classrooms used had real life objects and ICT materials provided.

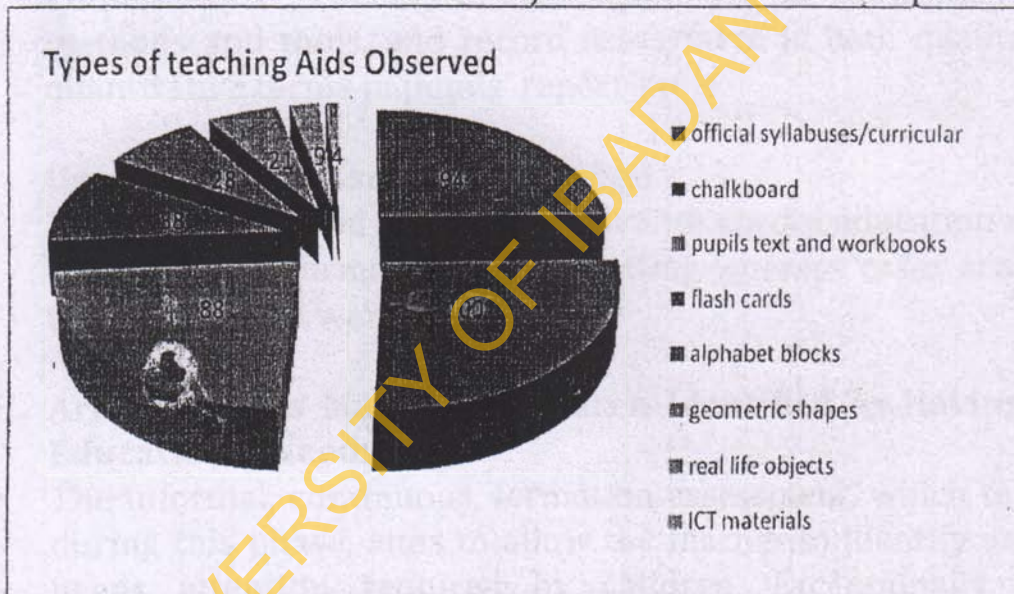


Figure 1: Types of Teaching Aids Observed

Nature of Grouping Children during each Section

It was observed that learners are grouped according to their ages. Inclusive education (including children with special need in regular classroom) was practised. Further, during teaching-learning activities, children are not grouped rather the whole class teaching was predominantly used by the teachers observed.

Age Children are transferred to Compulsory Education

The compulsory age for transfer to primary school, as stimulated in the policy, is at age six. For most children, the nursery or infant

school they attended is usually the primary school they proceed to thereby encouraging smooth transition to primary education at the age of six. Admission to primary education is automatic. Prior preschool education is a requirement for admission. However, it was observed that in some schools (especially the private schools) children proceed to primary level before age six.

The Forms of Assessment Used.

There is no national or formal system of assessment for students during this phase. Continuous assessment does, however, take place, and is the responsibility of the individual class teacher to organize this for his or her class. Assessment techniques used during this phase include interviews with parents, the direct and systematic observation of children by teaching staff, as well as use of tests and examinations. Teachers in each school set the assessment criteria, methods and tools, and record assessment in both qualitative and quantitative terms in pupils' report cards.

Uses of the Assessments Identified

There are situation where children with special education needs are integrated in normal classroom setting whereas cases arose where those identified were referred.

Arrangements Made for Children Identified as Having Special Educational Needs

The informal, continuous, formation assessment, which takes place during this phase, aims to allow the teacher to identify any special needs attention required by children. Exceptionally, Nigerian children within early childhood age who are identified as having special educational needs, which may be best met by a special school, can be enrolled by their parents in special education school. However, gifted children within that age may start using primary education texts early. In addition, they may also spend less time overall at the primary level education, that is, to reduce the time they spend in a specific level (up to a maximum of two years through double promotion as practised in some school). This is, of course, dependent on the how much mastery of the curriculum the child displays.

Uses of the Records Kept on Children

Assessments at this level are recorded in qualitative and quantitative terms. To be admitted into primary school, evidence that the child attended a pre-school must be submitted. Once the child satisfied this requirement, admission to primary school is automatic. Schools complete a first report when a child arrives in early years education setting and produce both quantitative and qualitative report at the end of the term. Teachers produce regular three-monthly reports, which are submitted to the child's family. A detailed report is also provided at the end of nursery education. Such reports include a description of the child's attainment, and recommended specific measures for future improvement and progression. Such reports are placed on the child's personal file. This is a single record which constitutes the educational record of the child and follows him or her through his or her school career. This document also records any special attention the child requires.

Quality Assurance

Systems and Procedure in Place for Funding

All early years establishments in Nigeria, whether government or private, have to provide an early years curriculum in line with the guidance provided by the Federal Government of Nigeria, and are subject to inspection. Since 2000, all establishments providing early years education have had to be registered as official pre-school establishments (Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2000) which come under the auspices of compulsory education.

Staffing and Ratios (the Average Size of the Group)

The result revealed that maximum teacher-children ratios for this level of education as determined by the Nigerian policy include:

- 0-3 years=20-25: one caregiver and a helper in private schools
- 3-5 years, 30-35: one teacher and one helper (in some private schools)
- 3-5 years, 35-40: one teacher (in some public schools) (FGN, 2004).

Staff Qualification Observed

The result also revealed that none of the pre-school teachers observed has specialized early childhood education training.

However, all are qualified to teach at this level based on the policy recommendation.

Discrepancy between the intended and the Observed Programme Operations

Discrepancy tends to exist in the type of texts, which are used, ways of organizing learning situations, and procedures for assessing and certifying learning outcomes (learning and mastery). Different texts abound and schools choose the one that they feel are of high quality for their learners. Further, some schools use texts that are a year ahead of the age of the learners, especially in private schools. Further discussions on areas where discrepancies were observed are as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Programme Operations where Discrepancies were Observed.

S/N	Programme Operations	Discrepancy (Observed)
1	Early Childhood Curriculum	Not all schools used the recommended. Some schools observed. (70%) do not have the recommended curriculum while 30% of the schools used make use of other types improvised-American, British, Frobelian, Montessorian, among others. Further there are also those who have the national curriculum but who also combine it with foreign ones. Variety instead of uniformity was the practice.
2	Teaching Method	Play was not used. However, all used direct teaching.
3	Teaching Aid	Prevalent one used was the chalk or white board. This was used by all the teachers observed. However, the use of teaching materials relevant to the subject taught was not prevalent. There was paucity of resource provision in all the schools visited.
4	Transfer to Compulsory Primary Education	It was observed that all the schools had about 98% progression to primary. The 2% less was due to attrition and death.
5	Record Keeping	Report cards used which are changes on yearly basis for every child.
6	Teacher Qualification	No one has early childhood training. But has one that qualified them to teach in a primary level or pre-school level.
7	Class - Size	This was adhered to. However, there were cases where the recommended class size was exceeded

		(45% of the schools). These schools were mainly the public schools.
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Conclusion and Recommendations

There are curriculum guidelines for early year education in Nigeria. These official guidelines determine general minimum standard for Nigerian children to attain at a given stage. The guidelines are adapted by individual schools in the formation of their own exclusive curricular plan, which is further adapted by class teachers to suit the needs of the learners. From the nursery sections (1-3), the focus of the curriculum content is on the overall development of the child and the contents are linked to the primary level of education curriculum. Learning experiences are centred on literacy, numeracy, science, physical, personal and social skill to ensure smooth transition to the primary level. The curriculum guidelines appear not to reflect the principles of early childhood curriculum which acknowledges the individual differences and child-centred learning. The curriculum is seen as consisting of areas of learning experience but tends not to emphasise much on active learning but teacher-centred activity in an integrated way, and also the actual curriculum subjects being introduced before school age of six years. Teaching methods employed by the teachers used did not reflect what was recommended by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2004). Direct teaching with minimal teaching aids provision appeared to be the practice.

Early childhood education curriculum should not be structured towards teaching separate subjects and rote learning, but rather toward stimulating active learning in captivating and child friendly environments. At this level, teaching-learning experiences should be carried out more with emphasis on hands on experiences and less on theory. A rule should be instituted demanding that all practising early childhood teachers be required to be exposed to child development courses as well as methodological courses on how to teach children within this age bracket. This can be organised through professional/in-service training courses. Provision should be made for specialized teachers for children with special needs.

Efforts should be made by the government to move towards having basically two types of curriculum for early children education. One should be a curriculum with prescribed activities and the other curriculum with specific teaching approach (Gioe,

2006). As Gioe has noted, prescribed activity-oriented curriculum offers many ideas and activities for young children in classroom, while teaching-approach curriculum offers a philosophy or way of teaching in pre-school settings. To practise this effectively, teachers should be reminded that ideas and activities for teaching-approach curricular should come from children's interest, needs and culture, whereas that of prescribed-activity should be incorporated into a teaching-approach curriculum by picking and choosing which activities are most meaningful to learners.

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