

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The issue of quality of early childhood education in Africa is examined in this paper. The factors that hinder good quality were also considered. The study emphasized the role of teacher quality, school organization climate, resource situation, government policies and school or learning process on childhood education. It was concluded that effort at improving the quality of early childhood education must focus on the provision of adequate fund, deployment of caring, competent, and qualified teacher, conducive, learner's friendly school climate, stable government policies and improved school process. There is also the need for a spirit and philosophy of realism and optimism for all stakeholders interested in early childhood education development in the African continent so as to equip this sector with quality education based on informed dialogue on education reform strategies.

Key words: Quality, childhood education, teacher quality, school organization climate, resource situation.

Introduction

Educators, parents, and policymakers agree that every child deserves a caring, competent, and qualified teacher at basic education level in order to build a solid foundation for the future educational development. Research has also shown that the quality of teaching in the classrooms is the most important in-school factor in improving student achievement. That is why policymakers at all levels are focusing on teacher quality, specifically on the issues of teacher recruitment,

preparation, licensing and certification standards, and professional development. The place of quality education to individual and national development cannot be overstated. Therefore, to fight poverty, marginalization and child labour in African continent, quality education, particularly beginning from the childhood, is the key (UNESCO, 1994; UNDP, 2002; and United Nations, 2004).

However, promoting quality childhood education demands a multi-dimensional approach. This is especially necessary when one considers the funding implication of providing this kind of qualitative early childhood education. Fabunmi (2006) had suggested collaborative funding of education. Collaboration is a cornerstone in early childhood education efforts. All education stakeholders must, therefore, be involved in the provision of adequate funds and resources; and participate in the process of making decision that will affect the quality and management of childhood education. Moreover, greater attempts must be exercised by all the stakeholders in sharing opinions and responsibilities and setting group goals in order to maintain good quality and ensure effective management of early childhood education in Africa. Thus, integrating children in high-quality early childhood educational programmes involves five components which also help to stress the importance of joint and multi-dimensional approach to improve the quality of early childhood education. These are: teacher quality, school climate, resource situation, government policies and school process. These will form the basis of this discussion.

Teacher Quality in childhood education

For early childhood education to succeed and be effective, the role of teachers cannot be overemphasized. Adedeji, (1998) quoting from the report of the United States Department of Health Education and Welfare, argues that teachers represent an indispensable human resource, indeed, the single most important element in the school system, more important than the quality of equipment and materials, or level of financing. Teachers are the limbs of the education system. Other studies (Hallak, 1977; Fuller, 1985 and Lewin, 2004) have shown that the quality of the education system depends on the quality of teachers. Viewed broadly, teachers are considered as the single most important factor in the overall aim of education. To produce men and women who possess both the culture and expert knowledge necessary

for the development of the society, caring, competent, and qualified teachers must be willing to teach at the basic and early childhood education level. Specifically, the role and involvement of qualified teachers in early childhood education could be summarised as follow:

- Providing children with opportunities for basic education,
- Building and sustaining strong linkages between the lower and higher levels of education,
- Serving as an agent of cultural transmission,
- Reducing the incidence of dropout from the formal school system in later education life (through improved relevance, quality and efficiency),
- Catering for the learning needs of children through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education, and
- Ensuring the acquisition of the appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral, and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning.

School organization climate and childhood education

Scheerens, as reported in Morgan et al (2005), argues in his analysis of school effectiveness research, that most of the variation between schools is due to classroom variation rather than other "school" factors. Recent research into the correlates of effectiveness relates largely to the classroom environment. Of the eleven factors identified by Sammons et al. (1995c), six emanate directly from the classroom (a learning environment, concentration on teaching and learning, purposeful teaching, high expectations, positive reinforcement, monitoring progress). The remaining five (professional leadership, shared vision and goals, pupils' rights and responsibilities, home-school partnership and a learning organisation) shape the cultural milieu of the school and create the climate in which an effective classroom is more likely to thrive. It is important to point out that the children of today are the leaders of tomorrow. Hence, the efforts of building community and establishing institutions to promote social justice must be imagined when providing education for the youth. The school climate must be conducive and friendly for the youth to facilitate their learning. The president of Republic of Uganda, President Museveni mentioned that,

"Time was, in traditional African society, when the well-being of a child was the responsibility of every adult in the community. He however, decried the poor school climate and the working condition of teachers in most African countries and blamed the backwardness of this part of the continent on these factors. Perhaps, the ineffective strategies adopted in school monitoring and supervision of instructional and infrastructural situation in, especially, the public schools are some of the major factors responsible for this deterioration in school climate. The poor and deprived public school has borne the greatest impact of this deplorable situation in many African countries. Many parents have thus turned to private education provider as a way out from the pervasive infrastructural failure of many public institutions. This is despite the fact that the direct costs of private schools are high and therefore only available to a privileged minority. Even when tuition is free in public schools, the indirect costs associated with attendance are high. For example, time lost from teachers' strikes, ineffective teaching methods combine with dilapidated infrastructure could impose higher indirect cost on the pupils and their parents than that available in private schools. The situation is even worse in the rural areas where limited, if any, private alternatives are available. In order to have a clear understanding of this situation; it is also necessary to consider the resource situation in early childhood education

Resource situation in early childhood education

For early childhood education to be effective in African continent there is a need to improve the quality of resources available. However, the education provided in many African countries, especially at the childhood level, has deteriorated over the recent years. Few will deny that things are not normal with respect to funding and allocation of resources to education in most African countries. The public expenditure on education as percentage of total government expenditure in these countries shows gross under funding when compared with inflation rate in the country and UNESCO recommendation.

The amount of funds devoted to education, which is far lower than the 26% of government expenditure as recommended by UNESCO, illustrates the poor commitment to the development of education and explains in part the progress that has been made in this sector in Africa.

In fact, if we consider, the criminal neglect of African government on childhood education alone, the situation is disturbing because of poor funding and inadequate pedagogical resources allocated to this important level of education. With reliable statistics for the purpose of monitoring and planning simply not available, education development in Africa, especially in the childhood sphere, has long been hindered. To improve the quality of childhood education provided in Africa, an effective strategy must be developed to monitor and raise the resources available in this area. The education that will contribute and make significant impact on African economy must be of high quality and this, of course, must start from the early childhood.

Government policies and early childhood education

The Policy on Education of many African countries emphasizes on providing unhindered access to qualitative basic education to all children irrespective of their gender, social class, ethnicity, occupation and religion, but this, as shown by many reports both from within these countries and outside by international observers (Ayara 2003; and Morgan et al, 2005), is yet to bring any appreciable improvement in the quality of education provided in these countries. For instance, the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) report provides a good insight into the effect of government policy on teachers and teaching on the quality and effectiveness of basic education in Nigeria. It could be summarized, as revealed by the report, that the poor performance in basic education in Nigeria is due to inconsistency in government policy (CBN 2000 cited in Ayara 2003).

However, many governments in African countries know these challenges all too well. However, despite increased awareness of our teacher-quality challenges and earnest efforts to address them, we, as a continent, are still far from having a stable and consistent education policy. It will be most charitable to imagine that the most consistent thing in the continent's education policy is inconsistency. One prominent reason we have not made sufficient progress toward our education goal in Africa is that the problems we face in ensuring high-quality teaching, far from being eradicated by state and government policies and practices, are often created or exacerbated by the frequent changes in these policies and practices. They stand as unnecessary barriers to improving teaching in Africa and make the challenges we

face more difficult. Failure to understand these barriers and the root causes of African education challenges often has led to inappropriate or inadequate policy decisions by African government. Thus, creating policies that will promote stability and quality of basic and childhood education should be paramount in the agenda of African government.

School process and childhood education

Although there may be a common understanding of what is required to improve the quality of early childhood education, a universal acceptability does not exist on what the process of early childhood education should be. Different countries have different perceptions of what process early childhood education should take, thus making comparisons problematic. Most of the research over the past twenty years into the school process and method of teaching has concentrated on identifying the main characteristics of effective teaching that appear to be linked to enhanced pupil outcomes (Floyd, 1999). To elucidate these key issues, the influence of school and home related factors on school effectiveness were examined. The result of the study where respondents were asked to assess how far 11 variables (size of class, children's background, lack of parental interest, SAT tests, national curriculum, size of my classroom, Lack of books/resources, Attitude of the children, behaviour of the children, lack of subject knowledge and lack of time) acted as constraints upon their teaching revealed that all eleven variables except teachers' lack of subject knowledge showed a non-significant influence on teaching effectiveness. Identifying individual variables, however, can lead to the misconception that they operate in isolation from one another. Westerhof (1992) has pointed out that learning gain is always the result of a combination of variables. It can never solely be explained by a single variable and he offers a particularly apposite example:

Little is learned when the curriculum is excellent and the method of instruction is co-operative but the students show a total lack of motivation. (Westerhof (1992, p. 207)

Thus, given the obvious importance of the teacher, problems in supporting newly developed methodology and a lack of career development opportunities at the early childhood education settings

often combine to make teachers' effectiveness at this level difficult in comparison with their counterparts at higher educational levels.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, effort at improving the quality of early childhood education, as advocated by scholars both from within and outside African continent, must focus on the provision of adequate funding, deployment of caring, competent, and qualified teacher, conducive, learner's friendly school climate, stable government policies and improved school process. Therefore, there is a need for a spirit and philosophy of realism and optimism for all stakeholders interested in early childhood education development in African continent to equip this sector with quality education based on informed dialogue on education reform strategies. Some of the recommendations for accomplishing this include:

- creating an awareness of the critical need to promote early childhood education among various constituencies of the continent;
- demonstrating the connection between early childhood education and economic development;
- providing realistic education opportunities that will provide friendly learner centre environment for the children;
- employing utilization-focused evaluation of childhood education programmes through collaborative teams and involving both education professionals and interested education stakeholders;
- including and infusing the local cultural practices into the curricula of childhood schools; and
- providing adequate materials, personnel, and financial resources consistently over the long term.

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