

**REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH: AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY
SYSTEM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CHILD**

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Abstract

Reggio Emilia's approach to curriculum implementation and the problem of the Nigerian child are all interwoven. Today 21st century child and national development are essential components of the seven points agenda of the present administration, which if solved will help to develop the economy and make Nigeria one of the 20th largest economies by the year 2030. It will help to reposition Nigeria among the committees of Nations. For the nation to move out of the present social doldrums, the position of the 21st-century child needs to be re-addressed to attain the anticipated sustainable development goals. This can be done by using Reggio Emilia of curriculum implementation in teaching and learning in pre-primary schools. In this direction, this paper had a look at the situation now, the interference between Reggio Emilia's approach of curriculum implementation and the 21st-century child and strategies for closing the gap.

Keywords: *Reggio Emilia approach, curriculum implementation, Nigerian child*

Introduction

An untutored and unbiased mind can critically look at the situation of things in Nigeria to see that Nigeria vision 20:2020, its precursors: the sevenpoint agenda and Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs) are not achievable by the target dates. The achievement of the present Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may not even be possible at the target dates. To worsen matters it may not even be achievable by the end of this century unless Nigeria goes through a rebirth. These challenges are all Nigerian made. One of the ways to curb these problems is through having a good methodology of instruction at the early childhood education. In this direction, Reggio Emilia approach of curriculum implementation in early-childhood may be the answer. What is this Reggio Emilia approach?

Before now, the Reggio people had been sending their children to school to attend a particular type of education ran by the Catholic missionary. The parents saw that the education does not benefit them and their society. They demanded for a more functional education - an education that will bring out the skills God has endowed in these children. According to Aslan (2002), children encounter a wall that prevents them from improvement in the development period. The essential objective of Reggio Emilia is to teach them to overcome this wall and to help them to be an individual. The question is; who will teach the child to overcome this wall and help the child to develop to an individual who is self-sufficient and who can deal with obstacles he encounters? A teacher Loris Malaguzzi, decided that there was need for a dialogue between the school, parents and the community to come out with a more utilitarian education. Thus in 1945 Reggio Emilia approach of instruction started in Italy in a city called Reggio.

The Reggio Emilia Approach of instruction is an educational philosophy based on the image of the child with many potentialities for development. The Reggio Emilia approach views the child as individuals who are curious about their world and have the powerful potentials to learn from all that surrounds them. The Reggio teacher exposes the child to educational opportunities that encourage self-expression, communication, logical thinking and problem solving.

The method of instruction has some principles that made it more functional, effective and knowledge acquisition more utilitarian. Some of the principles are; Child centered; Emergent Curriculum; It encourages collaborations; Long term project as a vehicle for learning; It enables them to interact discuss and come out with a single goal; Four teachers are involved in the teaching- parents, caregivers/school, the classroom is used as a teacher through making it child friendly and community/environment; Reggio Emilia encourages observation/ documentation, critical thinking and initiative reasoning – the children are made to know that they are knowledgeable. They can contribute to the wellbeing of the society. Thus the philosophy could be summed up as follows; children must have control over the direction of their learning (child centered curriculum, the child should be involved in the process of knowledge getting not an empty drum to be filled with information - as propounded by Brunner in Ebenebe &

Unachukwu 1994; children learn through touching, moving, listening and observing (concrete representation of reality in learning as propounded by Jean Piaget 1958); Children learn through having cordial relationship with other children, culture and with material things around them (social interaction and culture play a critical role in cognitive development as propounded by Lev Vygotsky theory of social Development and Margaret Mead's theory of cultural anthropology); Children must have many ways to express themselves, such as prints, art, drama, music, puppetry and dance (millions of cells are developed every minute by each child, these cells need to be engaged- the idea of multiple intelligences as propounded by Howard Gardner theory of Multiple Intelligences). The Reggio Emilia Approach to teaching and learning puts the child, the culture as well as their natural development at the center of its philosophy. The foundation of Reggio Emilia approach lies in its unique view of the child as the hub around which education revolves. In this way, as cited by Brunner, the child as an active constructor of knowledge with his desires, views, creativity, curiosity, idiosyncrasies and potentials should be involved in the process of knowledge getting rather than an empty drum to be filled with information. Thus the theory of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Margaret Mead, Howard Gardner and Jerome Brunner were all in agreement with Reggio Emilia Approach of teaching the young children. The 21st century child in the same way is a curious being who wants to take control of his own learning, give direction and have a cordial relationship with their peers and friends. In this way the Reggio Emilia Approach may help to make their education more interesting, functional, utilitarian and responsive to their needs.

The Situation Now

Nations have paid dearly for their failure to invest in the care and the development of the child in their early years. Like the health sector that struggles to cure diseases without first investing on prevention, education sectors struggle for, high rate of dropout, under achievements in education, economic problems, social injustice, political crisis, without first accessing the methods used in teaching the child. Their cares, survivals and developments help in the overall development of the nation. To UNICEF (1998) the survival, growth and development of any nation is treated as interdependent variable achievable through a broad range of services, health, education, safe environment and care given to the child.

In the history of human race, no family, community, town, organization, nation or any institution had ever moved forward without given the child a pivot position. Children attend pre-primary schools with the erroneous opinion that at worst they will come out with a certificate and enter primary schools. This goes contrary to the basic philosophy of pre-primary

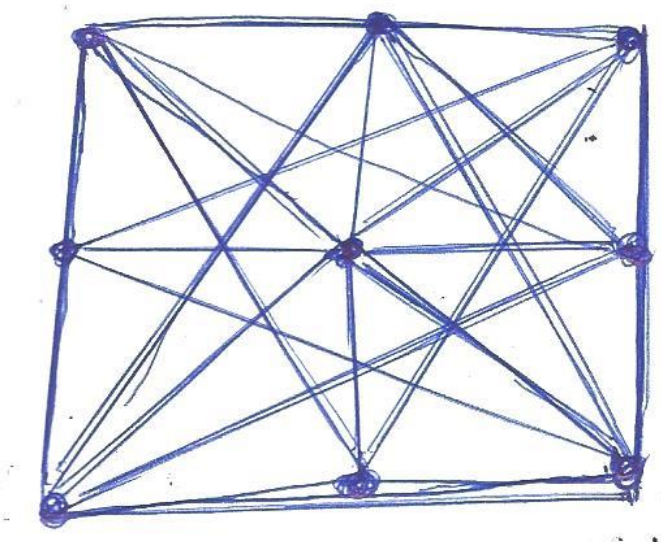
Education, which is not just to make one acquire the ‘meal ticket’ otherwise called certificate or enter primary school, these are even secondary. Emphasis of philosophy of pre-primary education in Nigeria as noted in the previous pages is to produce a competent based individual intellectually and skillfully well prepared with a solid foundation to enter primary school. This will as well make him face the complex task of the society and be able to make his mark in education and society generally. Having noticed a yawning gap between what is and what is supposed to be, which manifested itself in different forms in the society in form of; bribery and corruption, rape, cheating, banditry, kidnapping, lack of security, lack of dedication on the part of the rulers and the ruled, prostitution, armed robbery, examination malpractice, forgery and a host of other ill behaviours which are the results of poor pre-primary education and early childhood care. It becomes necessary that we think of how to give our education a re-birth by making it functional and utilitarian. This is necessary when one recalls that education is not an ornament rather a tool for solving problems such as unemployment, poverty, starvation, poor health, technological backwardness and global crisis. It becomes imperative the need to upgrade our education system in area of curriculum implementation in pre- primary schools. For these and many more reasons the past few decades have emphasized on the importance of using more effective methods in teaching pre- primary school pupils like; discovery, concept mapping, cooperative, traditional, discussion and project methods yet the problem persisted. Thus the authors of this paper deemed it necessary to make a case for Reggio Emilia approach of teaching and learning approach in pre-primary pupils to know if it will address the observed problems.

RATIONAL FOR THE USE OF REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH FOR THE NIGERIAN CHILD

Research evidence shows that the early years in life (0-5) are critical for the survival, development, wellbeing and learning of all individuals. Experiences, environments and relationships that children have in early years set the stage for their lifelong economic, health and social outcomes. According to Nigeria National population Statistics, children within the 0-5 year’s age bracket constitute approximately 19% of the entire population of the country. To prevent continued loss of developmental potentials and rather attain optimal developmental outcomes, focused attention must be paid to erecting supportive structures for children 0-5years. Thus Reggio Emilia approach of curriculum implementation is the answer. This is because, the method will institute structures to support positive child development outcomes in these ways:

Scientific: Brain research shows that at age of 0-5 years, the brain cells of the child form at the rate of more than 1 million cells per- second. A positive experience support brain cell connections outcomes, lay strong foundations and help reverse damaged brain connections. Leaving the child with no interconnectivity will make the brain fade away while those that were made use of will be well cemented. The child needs to be given sufficient activities to enable him/her to strengthen the millions of brain cells produced every second otherwise most of the cells will die off. The diagram can be seen bellow;

DIAGRAM OF BRAIN INTERCONNECTIVITY



Looking at the above diagram, the various activities the child is being exposed to through the use of Reggio Emilia approach

of curriculum implementation in the early childhood avails the child the opportunity to develop all these cells developed. Diagram above can be used to explain this; otherwise these cells will die off. The brain cells of the 21st century child develop very fast. This has some connection with Reggio Emilia approach of curriculum implementation. Negative experiences such as lack of stimulation and prolonged exposure to neglect, violence, abuse and trauma hinder brain connections as can be seen in diagram B. Access to quality pre-primary education helps to reduce poor brain connection. Evidence, supported by research and practical wisdom show that children who had quality pre-primary education, do better academically, remain in school longer, have access to higher education reduce the cost for education and even pay better taxes to the government.

- ❖ **Right of the child:** Regardless of ethnicity, gender, colour, race or economic status, every child has the right to access environments and experiences that support their full

developmental potentials. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4.2 emphasized on this right by targeting to ensure that by 2030 “ all children have access to quality early childhood development and care to ensure that they are ready for primary education. (Hawelti 2001).

- ❖ **Economic:** Investing in quality early Childhood education reduces education cost for the government. Investing in quality early childhood education costs less than remedial education. Also studies showed that university graduates get better jobs, earn approximately \$ 1 million more than non- university graduates. They are better equipped to support their families and society.
- ❖ **Health:** Studies showed that adverse early childhood environment, experiences and relationship trigger physiological responses that lead to lifelong physical and mental health in individuals. For instance adult who suffered toxic stress in childhood have much higher likelihood of heart disease, diabetes, mental health challenges, substance abuse and depression.
- ❖ **Current State of Pre-Primary Teachers Qualification:** According to UNICEF data, approximately 85% of pre-primary teachers are unqualified. Teacher quality is a key factor in improving education quality and outcome. There is an urgent need to fill this gap for effective pre-primary education. It is in line with these backgrounds that NCCE’s role is critical to provide knowledge base that supports optimal child development across all domains, strengthen quality in centers, schools, homes and community.

Interference Between Reggio Emilia Approach of Curriculum Implementation in Early Childhood Education and the Nigerian Child.

The problem of Nigerian child is how to use information gathered in the classroom setting to solve this problem at both individual and national level. This is because before now, the child, the parents and community are not actively involved in teaching and learning and many of the teaching aids used cannot be seen in the local environment. The education given cannot be related to the immediate environment.

Reggio Emilia approach of curriculum implementation emphasized child’s active involvement, parents, community, use of local materials and cultural background of the child in teaching and learning. Thus Reggio Emilia approach encouraged social interaction, culture and the more knowledgeable others (MKO) in teaching and learning as propounded by Lev Vygotsky theory.

In the same way, the explorative nature of the 21st century child (Nigerian child) which is manifested by asking how, why, where and the process of everything is taken care of by the Reggio Emilia approach. As Brunner rightly noted, the child needs to be involved on the process of knowledge getting. Once this occurs, it creates a fertile ground for meaningful learning which gives way for; integration, respect for culture and elders, love for others, patriotism, innovations and national development. Albinus, the method that was in use alienates the Nigerian child from all these. Reggio Emilia approach and 21st century child are two sides of the same coin. Knowledge acquired devoid of foreign technology can be easily adapted to solve our problems, be it at individual or national level. The use of Reggio Emilia gives the child the opportunity to acquire, use and apply the knowledge in novel situation for problem solving with or without the teacher or the text.

If we are looking forward to attain the anticipated millennium development goals and to move our country Nigeria from this economic doldrums, social injustice, negligence of the opinions of others, self-centeredness, lack of dedication and lack of man's concern for others, we need to embrace the Reggio Emilia approach of curriculum implementation in early childhood education.

The Way forward

The following suggestions are made to enable the implementation of the new curriculum possible:

- 1. Government Support:** The government need to give all the necessary supports, both human and material resources to make the implementation of this Reggio Emilia a reality, to enable the child as an individual and the nation at large attain their global height.
- 2. Commitment by ECCE lecturers:** There is need for lecturers to be totally committed as the method needs a lot of time, energy, creativity and improvisation of teaching materials from our local environment for effective implementation. Also organize classrooms in a way that helps children make thoughtful decisions about the materials they would like to use for different projects
- 3. Creation of awareness to all stakeholders of pre-primary education on the new method (Reggio Emilia approach) of teaching pre-primary school pupils:** Parents, school proprietors and Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB) need to be sensitized on the new method.

4. There is need to recruit more teachers that specialize in Early childhood education:

This is necessary as any teacher that is not at home with the Early Childhood teaching methods may find it difficult to apply this new approach

5. Document children's progress: This can be done using many different methods such as: video, photographs, tape recordings, portfolios and recorded dictations.

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