Pre-School Education for a Democratic Society: Identifying Views of Stakeholders in Tanzania

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Abstract: *The purpose of the study was to examine the perception of pre-school teachers, managers and parents about their role in the upbringing of children in a multi-ethnic society, and how the teachers would translate that understanding into actual programs considering gender and religious and cultural backgrounds of learners.*

The fieldwork covered 26 selected pre-schools in five administrative regions. The respondents were 26 managers of the pre-schools, 31 pre-school teachers and 49 parents. The data were collected through structured interviews, documentary review, and a questionnaire. From the findings, it was observed that most respondents preferred to send children to mixed schools so as to inculcate democratic values of collectivism. However, few parents preferred separate schools so as to establish a firm religious foundation for their children. It is suggested that the curriculum should provide learners with the opportunity to enhance their understanding of a variety of religious beliefs and practices.

AIMS OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

In 1986 the Ministry of Education pre-school policy draft paper recommended the establishment of a uniform pre-school system which was subsequently incorporated in the Education and Training Policy of 1995 (MoEC, 1995). According to the new policy, the goals of pre-school education are as follows:

(i)   To encourage and promote the overall personality development of the child, that is, his or her physical, mental, moral and social characteristics and capabilities;

(ii) To identify children with abnormal patterns of development or educational potentials and devise special programmes for them;

(iii) To mould the character of the child and enable him/her to acquire acceptable norms of social conduct and behaviour;

(iv) To help the child acquire, appreciate, respect and develop pride in the family, his or her cultural backgrounds, moral values, customs and traditions as well as national ethic, identity and pride;

(v) To provide the child with opportunities to acquire and develop communication, numerical and manipulative skills;

(vi) To prepare the child for primary school education.

Individuals and NGO's, religious institutions, the political party (CCM) and parents run the pre-schools in Tanzania. Such a decentralised pre-school curriculum may be desirable for purpose of community autonomy, accountability, efficiency, and promotion of diversity in the society (Lauglo & McLean, 1985; Lauglo, 1990). However, some critics are concerned that, if not properly regulated, a decentralised pre-school system may turn into a nursery for the transmission of parochial values and identities based on one's place of origin or on ideological and religious beliefs (McLean, 1985; White, 1990; McLaughlin, 1987). Probably, it is for this reason that some researchers have advocated a common pre-school curriculum (Kisasi, 1991; MoEC, 1995). In Tanzania, such fears are now given stimulus by the emergence of conflicting religious identities and fundamentalism arising from liberalisation. Clearly, the moulding of democratic and responsible citizens has to begin at the critical pre-school level. This study aimed at investigating the extent to which pre-school teachers were conscious of this role at a time when some cultural values seem to contradict national values in Tanzania

DIVERSITY AND VALUE CONFLICTS IN TANZANIA
Cultural diversity dates back to pre-colonial times but is now compounded by the growth of racial identities, regional economic disparities, as well as class differentiation. More diverse than those differences is religious diversity. Within Christianity, Islam and Other religions, there are several sub-groups each with a fundamentalist wing, e.g. *'walokole'* (for Protestants), *'wanamaombi'* (for Roman Catholic, noted for their extreme devotion to the Virgin Mary), and *'mujahidina'* (for Muslims).

In July and August 1999, various newspapers in Tanzania covered stories about the grievances of an Islamic group referred to as the Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Moslems (Shura ya Maimamu). *Mtanzania* (29.7.1999) reported on the intention of the group to stage a peaceful demonstration as a sign of their opposition to remarks made in Parliament by members of political parties, including CCM, NCCR-Mageuzi, and CHADEMA, against the wearing of 'hijab' as uniforms special for Muslim girl students. The said members of parliament had argued that such a practice would lead to social division along religious lines which, they warned, would be detrimental to peace and tranquillity in the country. The remarks were made after the budget speech delivered by the Minister for Education, in which he made three controversial statements:

• Every head teacher, headmaster/headmistress, or college principal should make sure that students wear dresses that are acceptable to their religion during prayers.

- The government shall continue to ensure that the religious issue does not arise when registering students for Form I, Form V and Colleges of Education.

- All education institutions should take into account the issue of religion in the implementation of economic projects so that the projects do not become a bother to other students (*Taifa Letu*, Aug. 1-7, 1999).

Broader issues of alleged discrimination against Moslems in matters of education, employment, promotions and the granting of business licences triggered the peaceful demonstration that took place on 30 July 1999. (*Nipashe*, 30.7.1999).

Recently it was reported in the news media that four students of the Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) had been expelled from the university after the students had refused to do a test scheduled on Friday evening. A similar decision by Senate was taken in 1993. The refusal to take the test was based on strong religious beliefs of the Seventh Day Adventist Church followers that it is a sin to work on the Sabbath Day. Following the Senate's decision, there was much resentment among some university students about the expulsion of the four students. They argued that that decision contravened the right and freedom of belief and of worship (*Majira*, 3 February 2002).

Clearly the events are an expression of a high level of social division based on religious/cultural belief, which, increasingly, is becoming a political issue. Unless something is done very early in the upbringing of children so as to mitigate this value conflict, there is little hope for a peaceful, healthy and comfortable life for so many of our children. The danger is that the seeds of ethnic/religious intolerance will be inculcated to the young children by the parents, teachers of pre-schools and managers of the pre-schools. Hence, the conception of this research.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
This study was concerned about how pre-school teachers, managers and parents perceived their role in the upbringing of children in a multi-cultural (mixed) society, and how the teachers would translate that understanding into actual programs. The major research questions were: Who manages the pre-schools? Who sends children to the pre-schools? Who teaches in the pre-schools? What motivates parents to send children to pre-schools? How do teachers perceive their role in the upbringing of children for a plural, democratic society? How does gender and religious affiliation affect parents' choice of pre-schools? How does gender and religious affiliation affect teaching methods?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative and qualitative research approach was used. The fieldwork covered 26 selected pre-schools in five regions, with a good balance in the number of Christians and Muslims, namely Dar es Salaam, Tanga, Dodoma, Mbeya, and Morogoro. School visits were made between July through October 2000. The respondents were 26 managers of the pre-schools, 31 pre-school teachers and 49 parents. Personal particulars were sought from all the respondents as regards gender, educational background, and religious affiliation.

The schools were purposively selected. The instruments for data collection included structured interviews, documentary review, and a questionnaire. The data were collected as regards categories of children enrolled in the school by gender, and religion; whether enrolment was open for children of all beliefs; reasons for sending children to the school; the school curricula; sources of funds and rates of fees; teaching methods used by teachers; parents' preference about the type of school.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It was found that a typical pre-school teacher in the study was a Christian lady with 1-10 years of teaching experience, with or without any professional training. The pre-school manager was a male or female, Christian or Muslim, with education background ranging from primary to university levels. However, the parents were mostly Christian, both male and female, with primary and secondary education background. It was conjectured that differences in gender, religious upbringing and level of literacy might affect the actors' perception of their roles.

Parents' Views and Support of Pre-school Education

The parents were asked about the motivation for sending their children to pre-schools. The responses were then analysed according to gender and religion of the respondents. The data indicated that:

(i) Regardless of gender, most parents said they send their children to pre-schools mainly in order to prepare them for primary school. (64.6%).

(ii) However, a larger percentage of Christian parents (80%) than of Muslim parents (38.9%) said they sent their children to pre-school as preparation for primary school.

(iii) A larger percentage of Muslim parents (66.7%) than of Christian parer.ts(20%) said they sent their children to pre-school because of proximity of the school and the affordability of school fees.

(iv) Most parents, regardless of gender, educational background or religious affiliation, were satisfied with the school if the child performed well, was disciplined, and could read and write.

In response to the question whether the parents preferred to send their child to a mixed faith school or a one-faith school, most parents said they preferred a mixed faith school. While the parents who preferred a separate school argued that they wanted to establish a firm religious foundation for their children, the parents who preferred mixed faith schools were not worried about religious differences. They were concerned about promoting equality and neutrality in training.

Views of Pre-school Managers

The findings on the views of school managers on appropriate methodologies for handling multicultural classrooms suggest that, regardless of the educational background, the respondents preferred to mix the children in games so as

(i)   To promote among the children the feeling of being one /equal (54.2%),

(ii)   To reduce prejudice among the children (45.8).

(iii)   To enable the children to understand each other (16.7%).

(iv)   To reduce gender fear. (4.2%).

Analysed according to religious affiliation of the respondent, the data indicated that

(i)   Muslim respondents put more emphasis on reduction of prejudice (58.3%) and less emphasis on promoting equality among the children (8.3%).

(ii)   Christian respondents put greater emphasis on equality (58.3%) and less emphasis on reduction of prejudice. (25.0%).

Views of Pre-school Teachers

Views were sought from the pre-school teachers about the appropriate curriculum for pre-schools. The data suggested that teachers are concerned more with intellectual growth and the good behaviour of the children than with the spiritual/religious dimension.

The views of pre-school teachers about the appropriate methodology for handling multi-cultural classrooms were also analysed and ranked. They preferred mixing the children during games because they wanted to reduce gender bias among the children, to promote equality among the children, to encourage co-operation, to promote love for one another, and to enable the children to understand each other.

The above findings suggest that teachers, like most parents, are tolerant and they do cherish diversity

SUMMARY
This study sought to examine the views of stakeholders on appropriate pre-school education for a democratic society. The research findings suggest most parents send their children to pre-schools mainly in order to prepare them for primary school. So, regardless of gender, educational background or religious affiliation, parents are satisfied with the school if the child performs well, is disciplined, and can read and write. They would prefer to send their children to mixed religion schools and do not seem to be worried about religious differences because they are concerned about inculcating egalitarian values among the children. The concern about the inculcation of egalitarian values was also expressed by the managers of pre-schools and by the pre-school teachers. It would seem that the seeds of intolerance being propagated by some religious fundamentalists are yet to take root among the teachers.

DISCUSSION: SCHOOL UNIFORMS OR UNIFORM SCHOOLS?
Very few parents said they prefer separate religious schools for their children because they would like to establish a firm religious foundation for their children. This raises two philosophical questions that go beyond the pre-school. The questions are *what is a religious school and how is such a school compatible with the requirements of a democratic plural society? (McLaughlin, 1987).*

With so many schools being established as seminaries, the two questions are important to consider if Tanzania is to remain a tranquil nation united in diversity. Therefore, considering the cultural diversity and value conflicts existing in the larger society, the curriculum in all schools should attempt to mitigate the value conflicts rather than aggravate those conflicts. Religious schools can do that if learners are exposed in a systematic and appropriately objective way to a broad range of values, beliefs, and ways of life and life ideals, and if they are given the opportunity to enhance their understanding of a variety of religious beliefs and practices.

There should be clear division of responsibilities between the school on the one hand, and the home/religious community on the other hand. The role of the home/religious community should be to reinforce/preserve values, beliefs and cultural identities of pupils. The role of the school should therefore be educational, namely to develop the values through critical reflection on them, and to assist pupils to understand the nature of religion and diversity of belief systems, their significance for individuals, and how these bear upon the community.

Parents must be genuinely committed to the educational aspects of the child's schooling; they must not be motivated by religious, racist or xenophobic considerations. Parents should make the rational choice between the demand for a particular type of school uniforms and the desirability of school uniforms.

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