

# THE NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION: A CRITICAL DIAGNOSIS AND ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS FACING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

Education should enable an individual to be acceptable to his environment so as to live a useful and purposeful life. Nigeria is now in a very important stage of its development and for her to succeed her citizens should be well exposed technically. This cannot be achieved unless there is solid foundation from the start. Primary Education is the embryo of future educational attainment. As the walls and the roof of a house cannot be strong unless the foundation is strong, similarly one cannot build a sound secondary and higher education on a weak primary foundation. Primary school covers the most critical and formative years in a child's development and growth process. The introduction of the Universal Primary Education sparked off problems in the nation's educational system. This paper would therefore critically diagnose and analyse the problems facing primary education in Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Education brings about economic mobility, social improvement and cultural growth in a country. This is true for Nigeria which is in a stage of rapid political, economic and social development. Education had existed in Nigeria before the coming of the missionaries. Non-formal traditional African education, of which Nigeria is part of, had given Nigerian children an "immediate induction into society and a preparation for adulthood" (Adewole, 1990:14). Children were practically involved in farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, carving and different trades carried out by their parents and other adults. With the coming of the European missionaries, traders and explorers, a new system of education was introduced in 1472. According to Fafunwa (1969:24), "the main purpose of education in the early stages was to teach Christianity with the view to converting all those who come within the four walls of the mission". This brought about formal education in Nigeria with the teaching of reading, writing, arithmetic (the 3 R's). A private primary school was opened in the palace of the Oba of Benin in 1515 by the Roman Catholic Mission for his children and his chiefs' children (Fafunwa, 1969:54). Mr. and Mrs. De Graft opened a public school in Badagry in 1843 (Fafunwa, 1969:62). The three main sources which provided the framework for the development of Nigerian education were:

1. The Education Ordinance No. 3 of 1887 which promoted education in the colony of Lagos and which was derived from the English system (Taiwo, 1980:17).
2. The Education Proclamation No. 19 of 1903 applicable to the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, which was influenced by the practice of the Presbyterian Mission with its background of the Scottish Educational System (Taiwo, 1980:30).
3. The Girouard Vischer System for the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria based on the educational system of the Sudan which aimed at secular education and at keeping children, their environment and culture (Taiwo, 1980:41).

It was only in 1948 that a common ordinance came into effect. It would also be noted that Nigerians up to this period did not have much responsibility over these systems. With the development of the Nigerian Constitution in the 1950s, Nigerians were involved and started having responsibility over their educational system. With independence in 1960 and the attainment of a republic in 1963, Nigeria had full responsibility for its educational system. This led to the National Curriculum Conference of September, 1969. Part of its report was the revolutionary recommendation to change the former educational structure of 6-5-2-3 to a new 6-3-3-4 system. The Federal Government on its National Policy on Education said that

It is the Government's wish that any existing contradictions, ambiguities, and lack of uniformity in educational practices in the different parts of the Federation should be removed to

ensure an even and orderly development of the country.

The old system prepared Nigerian children for white-collar jobs. It did not give them education for life nor did it prepare them sufficiently to face the challenges of nation building.

There is bound to be change in a developing country, even in a developed one. The world is not static, but change in the modern world is always too rapid. Lengrand (1975) viewed changes as "Innovations which formerly called for sustained effort, by several generations are now accomplished only by one". On the other hand, White (1966) observed that

in the past, important change was considerably longer than that of a single human life. Thus mankind was trained to adapt itself to fixed conditions. Today this time-span is considerably shorter than that of human life and accordingly the training must prepare individuals to face a novelty of conditions.

Change in the nation's educational system brought about the Universal Primary Education (U.P.E.) launched in September, 1976. It sparked off the beginning of problems in the educational sector.

## PROBLEMS FACING PRIMARY EDUCATION

### Inadequate Facilities:

The Universal Primary Education (U.P.E.) which means Free Primary Education for all brought about the increase of primary schools and primary school children. This led to the problem of primary school plant. Some of the primary schools, due to political reasons were sited without consideration to the needs and interest of the learner and the community where they are situated. Some important aspects of site like existence of a route for public transport services, area for future expansion, maximum distance required for a child to travel to and from school, easy access to community facilities and enough land for physical education were not considered.

Most primary schools lack good floors, good doors and windows. With the absence of windows and doors, the available furniture are usually stolen by rogues, thereby worsening the situation of inadequate plant facilities. Some school pupils sit on windows while some take their desks to school. Due to the economic recession, some pupils do not go to school with textbooks, exercise books and writing materials. Obiagwu (1997:67) observed that "primary school pupils learn in over-crowded classrooms. A classroom which normally would have accommodated thirty to forty pupils presently in some schools accommodate seventy to eighty pupils in urban and semi-urban towns, even in rural areas". Primary schools are besieged with different sorts of equipment problems.

### *Inadequate Fund:*

Change according to Dalin (1978:8) "is not a magic short cut to educational wonderland. It is not a bag of tricks easy to apply to troubled school system. Rather it is a difficult, time-consuming, energy-exhausting and often costly process". This is the case with the Universal Primary Education (U.P.E.). The Federal Government on inception of the scheme said that it

would be made compulsory "as soon as possible". This same government, in 1979, instead of making the scheme compulsory for children of primary school age, abandoned it. Money meant for the development of education were diverted to other projects. State and local governments were not able to fund primary education.

To try to find solution to the confused state of primary education, in 1988, the Federal Government promulgated Decree No. 31, establishing the National Primary Education

Commission, State Primary Education Management Board for each state and National Primary Education Development Fund (Ukeje, 1998).

Amongst other functions, the National Primary Education Commission is to:

1. Prescribe minimum standards for primary education throughout the country.
2. Collate in liaison with the State government periodic master plans for a balanced and coordinated development of primary education in the country.
3. Collate, analyse and publish information relating to primary education.

The National Primary Education Development Fund enabled Federal Government to contribute sixty-five percent (65%) of both primary school teachers and non-teachers' salaries. In 1991 the Federal Government promulgated Decree No. 2 which amended the 1979 constitution, thereby handing over the funding and management of primary schools to local governments. Also with Decree No. 3 that same 1991, Local Government Education Commission and National Primary Education Development Fund were scrapped with the abrogation of Decree No. 31.

In 1993, the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), in protest to the control of primary education by the Local Government Authority went on strike when they could not reach an agreement with the Federal Government. This led to the replacement of Decree No. 3 of 1991 by Decree No. 14 of 1993. This Decree did not place primary education to the charge of any group or named body. In 1994, the National Primary Education Board was re-instated and at State level, it is State Primary Education Board. This board was responsible for the payment of teachers' and non-teachers' salaries. With the Federal Government's new salary structure, change in primary school teachers' salaries was not affected with the result that they were on strike from February to June, 1999. Up to the time of writing this paper, January to March salaries and July and August salaries of primary school teachers have not been paid by State Governments. Those paid was as a result of the release of N4.5 billion by Obasanjo's government to offset teachers' salary arrears, and this led to the suspension of the strike action though NUT by 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1999 had threaten to go back on strike if State governments do not complete the payment of their salaries (promotion arrears since 1996, non-implementation of teachers' pension scheme and the teachers' registration council (Afolabi 1999:28).

Recently, the Federal Government, this year 1999, scrapped the National Primary Education Board. Teachers, National Union of Teachers (NUT), National Teacher/Parent Association of Nigeria (NAPTAN) are not happy with the Federal Government on the decision. They agreed that the main problem of the body is corruption and fraud and requested for restructuring than scrapping. They fear that transfer of primary education to State governments would bring back the issue of non-payment of teachers' salaries.

The Federal Government had also declared free basic primary education for primary school pupils, starting from 1999/2000 academic school year. The programme would be launched on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 1999 at Kangiwa Square, Sokoto. Funding of primary education had constituted a headache for the present administration. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), recommended fifteen percent of the nation's annual budget on funding of the national education system. Vision 2010 recommended twenty-SK percent. Despite these recommendations, in 1992, 2.7 percent was allotted to the educational sector; in 1993 seven percent; in 1994 10.3 percent; in 1995 11.5 percent; in 1996 10.8 percent; in 1997 11.6 percent; 1999 9.7 percent. There is still short fall in the recommendations made (Aina., 1999:23). Funding of the nation's educational system is yet to be solved.

### *Mismanagement of Fund:*

Fund meant for the development of primary education and payment of teachers' salaries were often diverted to either other projects or personal purses. An example previously cited was the attitude of the Federal Government towards funding primary education in 1979 when the burden was pushed over to State and Local Governments. Fafunwa (1990) noted that "some state governments simply diverted the fund meant for education where they thought they had more urgent and pressing matters". He equally stated his observation from 1976 - 1989 that "the Federal Government was still pumping money without any follow-up to see whether states were complying or not".

The establishment of National Primary Education Board and the State Primary Education Board enriched many individuals. Those employed to work in these boards divert money meant for primary school development and teachers' salaries to building personal houses taking titles, buying different cars and enriching themselves in every aspect. This September 1999, it was announced over the television that seventeen local government Chairmen in Nassarawa State, under the Abubakar regime, embezzled over eighty million Naira meant for teachers' salaries to build houses and establish other businesses. The Governor remanded them in prison custody and confiscated those buildings. Ali Adamu, the former executive secretary of the National Primary Education Commission (NPEC), had been alleged to have awarded a N1.2 billion contract deal. He was removed from office last June and the matter is under investigation (Aina, 1999:23). Such is the case in different states of the federation.

### *Poor Leadership:*

Leadership in the education system, like other sectors in Nigeria, is politically oriented. Non-professionals are installed in sensitive posts in primary education. Instead of progress, the outcome would be embezzlement, Ukeje (1998) is of the view that

part of the reason for the continued crisis in our educational institutions and in the entire education system is that some of those occupying leadership positions in the education enterprise are not educational leaders. They do not get into education leadership without a mission or vision - vision of what the institution should be and a sense of mission to accomplish it. Some get in just for personal gains and others for personal aggrandizement.

This is the case with some individuals either elected or appointed to head the affairs of primary education. The basic education for someone to be elected politically is senior secondary school certificate. Some primary school educational leaders at the Local Government Area have this as their highest qualification. With this education is then dragged to the mud.

### *Teachers' Problems:*

The Universal Primary Education Scheme brought about the intake of more pupils of primary school age into primary education. There was shortage of primary school teachers. Enough teachers could not be trained because of the short period of the scheme secondary school

leavers were recruited to fill the gap. The federal government made a policy that Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) would be the minimum qualification for primary school teachers. This brought about the mad rush in enrolment into Colleges of Education and the boom in Sandwich programmes. Some teachers still teach with Teachers' Grade II Certificates. Those that have obtained their N.C.E. are not fantastic. The issue of a teacher teaching all the primary school subjects in a class poses a lot of problems in the effective teaching and learning. These NCE teachers take courses in either double major or two subject

combinations. Very few went through the Department of Primary Education Studies. As a lecturer in this department, one finds that teachers have phobia for all Mathematics, English and Primary Science courses. Thus the question is how do they teach Mathematics, English and Primary Science in primary schools? Once, a pupil asked her teacher a question in arithmetic on conclusion of a lesson. The result was that the pupil was seriously scolded by the teacher. When the writer approached the teacher, she confessed that she only taught the lesson as taught by somebody the previous day. That she would not be able to solve other problems except the ones that was solved for her. This is the situation with other subjects.

Non-payment of salaries as at when due had made teachers to be involved in other businesses. Presently, they are more interested in these businesses than teaching. When one visits primary schools, one sees teachers (those present) deeply involved in conversations, leaving pupils to idle away in classes. Some rich ones bribe their head teachers and leave school immediately after signing the attendance register. How do pupils learn in such situations?

In the process of change, for example, the implementation of the National Policy on Education, teachers should be clear on the aims and objectives of primary education. Even if a programme or scheme is very good, successful implementation depends on what the teachers would do and are prepared to do. Milstein (1982:15) noted that Involvement, commitment and ownership are important considerations in the process of implementing change. Thus the basic flaw in attempts to bring about change in Educational settings is that those who are expected to manage the innovation are often not consulted about their views or asked to participate in the setting or purposes and/or design of the delivery system. Weatherley and Lipsky (1979) called policy implementers "street-level bureaucrats". Lewis (1965:18) said that "ultimately, the success of development plan or policy depends on those who are to carry it out. If it is to mean anything, its aims and the choices it involves, must be accepted and everyone must grasp the role which he has to play in this general mobilisation of national effort". Obiagwu (1983) found out from the study conducted in Sokoto State, that teachers at both primary and secondary levels were not given any sort of orientation or seminar conducted for the take off of the new policy. Some teachers even found it strange to hear that there was a change in the educational system.

#### *Problems Created by Parents:*

Parents have a blame to share (if it is really from them) on the problems encountered in primary education. Due to the economic recession that was man-made in Nigeria, some parents were not able to afford sending their wards to school, even when primary education was made free. Initially, intake of pupils of primary school age rose in 1976 and then dropped (Ehiamezor 1998), There are reasons for this. Some parents were not able to provide textbooks uniforms, seats, levies imposed by schools for their wards. Parents send their wards hawking in order to survive the economic stress. Some send their wards to various apprenticeship. Ginsberg (1969) in Adewole (1990:11) said that

One of the overriding conditions that determine man's existence is his ability to earn a live-hood. If education does not help one to accomplish this imperative, it must be adjudged a failure no matter what it may contribute to the honing of his mind, the refinement of his senses, the clarity of his moral judgement. Nigerian Educational System had not been functional and had not reached its citizens' expectations. The welfare of civil servants had been dragged to the mud. After spending fabulous amount on an individual's education, on completion would be left unemployed and would continue depending on people's help for his or her livelihood. Salaries of those employed would not be paid as at when due. With these outcome poor parents who could not afford sending their wards to school do withdraw them. Some of these school drop-outs eventually do not succeed. The result in most cases is juvenile delinquency. They involve themselves in all sorts of social ills and crimes. Do we have to a hundred percent blame them? This is the result of flaws in our

educational system and the mismanagement of our resources, both material, fund and human.

#### *Management Problems:*

Keeping of records and data is one of the major obstacles being encountered in our educational system. Although accurate records and data might not solve all the problems in Nigeria Primary Schools yet it would probably minimize poor managerial and planning techniques. Poor data, managerial and planning techniques could result to wastages in our educational system. Uyanga (1991:11) identified some management problems. According to her, they are:

- Poor estimated staff requirement per session or term.
- Inadequate knowledge of available facilities and maintenance needs in schools. 3.
- Lack of adequate knowledge of curricular decisions.
- Inadequate information for personnel management (unpaid, over paid teachers, staff salaries and allowances, accommodation, teaching load, appraisal of performances).
- Inaccurate demographic figures resulting in pupils' overcrowding in schools and a consequential improper allocation of learning materials to schools.
- Poor quality and quantity control through supervision.
- Difficulties in budget preparation.
- Inability to carry out follow-up programmes of graduands or to ascertain drop-out rates.

### **CONCLUSION**

Primary education is a basic need or want for a pupil of primary school age. The Federal Government's objectives for primary education have not been met due to some quantitative and qualitative lapses that resulted due to inadequate funding of primary education. This has remained a persistent problem facing primary education in Nigeria. Poor funding gave rise to other problems and the Federal Government's intention of making the Universal Free Primary Education compulsory is yet to be achieved.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Federal Government should endeavour to raise the budgetary allocation for education D 15% as recommended by UNESCO.

If fund is made available, the Federal Government should commence the restructuring of primary education by equal distribution of facilities and renovation of school buildings.

The Federal Government should also scrap all State Primary Education Board (SPEB) and hand over the payment of teachers' and non-teachers' salaries to State governments but should constantly provide money for the payment.

The Federal Government should create a system to be used as follow-up to see that States would utilize the money meant for primary education for the purpose.

Conferences and seminars should occasionally be organised for primary school teachers to up date their knowledge in educational changes.

Educational professionals should be given educational posts for effective and successful implementation of educational policies in the primary school system.

The development of science and manipulative skills should be enforced in primary schools in-order to enhance and boost the advancement of technology in Nigeria.

The welfare of civil servants should be elevated to bring back the status of civil servants to what it was formerly. This might reduce school drop-outs.

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