

# REAPPRAISING THE CURRENT NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION FOR FUNCTIONALITY AND SELF- RELIANCE: ISSUES FOR FREE EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

This work is focused on the issue for free education raised in the National Policy on Education. The author tried to find out how free is the Nigerian free education programme. The author also took a look at the historical development of free education in Nigeria and the issues that were raised. The problems of free education in Nigeria were also discussed. The paper ended with recommendation and conclusion.

## **Introduction**

Education is mistaken by some people as a process of bringing up a person in school or other formal institutions. Also, some believe that the British brought education to Nigeria, this is also wrong, because every society has a way of preparing its young members to live and serve inside and outside the society, share and transmit intellectual skills, knowledge, values, beliefs and attitudes of the society. In Nigeria, before the arrival of the British, people were educated in craft, traditional medicine, hunting, fishing etc.

National Policy on the Education (2004) described education in Nigeria as an instrument “parexcellence” for effecting national development. According to Sola Aina, Iyiomolade, and Oluremi (2006), education is a potent weapon in the arsenal of any country in pursuit of national development. Alumode (2010) defined education as a process by which the child, the youths and adults are adequately prepared for physical, mental, moral and spiritual growth to enable them live and contribute positively towards the development of the society. Ocho (2010) defined education as an instrument for

the survival, growth and development of the society.

The above definitions suggest that education is more than schooling. Education exposes one into new knowledge and experience for his growth and development. Education is a right that should be accorded to all human beings.

## **The Roles of Education In Society**

The roles of education in our different societies are so numerous that they cannot be written in a textbook. The author will only take a look at a few related roles.

- (a) According to Emile Durkheim, education can improve the social solidarity by teaching people shared history about themselves to evoke and develop the similarities of common people and then, bind them together to stable the big society.
- (b) Education helps in transmitting ideology.
- (c) Education offers everyone equal chance.
- (d) As for the feminist perspectives, maintaining gender inequality is one of the main roles of education.
- (e) In industrial societies, education help people learn specialized skills and knowledge to get good jobs and earn money.

## **Basic Education and Universal Basic Education**

A national policy is a statement of ideas proposed or adopted by a national government, National Teachers Institute Module; [2004]. A national policy on education is government’s way of realizing that part of the national goals can be achieved

using education as a tool, National Policy on Education;[2004].

The National Policy on Education [NPE][2004] Section 3 defined basic education as an education of nine years duration comprising of six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. It shall be free and compulsory. It shall also include adult and non-formal education programmes at primary and junior secondary education levels for adult and out of school youths.

Universal Basic Education Act (2004) defined basic education thus: - “basic education means early childhood care and education and nine years of formal schooling”. The same Act also define Universal Basic Education (UBE) thus: Universal Basic Education means early childhood care and education and nine years of formal education, skill acquisition programmes and the education of special groups such as nomads and migrants, girl-child, women, almajiri street children and disabled groups.

A close look at the above definitions shows that in the context of the law, basic education bears a restrictive definition while universal basic education is broadly defined, but the critical features of education as defined here include “compulsory”, “free” and “universal” education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age.

According to Oxford Advanced Dictionary (1997) “compulsory” means “that must be done because of law or a rule. The same dictionary defined “free” as no payment –costing nothing”. It also defined “universal” as “of belonging to, affecting or done by all or things in the world or in particular group”.

### **Historical Development of Free Education in Nigeria**

We must recall that the drive towards free education in Nigeria began in 1950s with the then Western Region government led by late Chief Awolowo and was also adopted by Chief Michael

Okpara (Premier of Eastern region). The purpose was to guarantee equal opportunities for every citizen. After independence in the 1960, free education was suspended, despite the fact that the 1961 Addis Ababa conference for African nations called for the adoption of the universal primary Education (UPE). In 1976, after 16years of independence the UPE programme was implemented nationally. The programme required a large amount of fund for procuring the needed school plants and facilities for its effective implementation. It has lots of problems which include lack of teachers, poor infrastructure, over-crowded classrooms etc. However, the general belief was that the output from UPE does not have required marketable skills capable of steering the ship of human resources needed for economic development in the country.

The search for a way out of this problem led the Obasanjo administration to launch the Universal Basic Education [UBE] in 1999. The basic policy includes a free and compulsory primary, junior secondary and nomadic education. It also included adult and non-formal education programmes. Saro [2000] explained that education in Nigeria is guided by the broad national objectives which are articulated in the National Policy on Education. Based on this, the UBE Act [2004] and the Child Right Act provided the legal framework for the implementation of the programme which made basic education not only free but also compulsory. In addition, as a signatory to the 2000 World Education conference and the six Dakar goals towards achieving Education For All (EFA), Government has also established a national EFA co-ordination unit under the Federal Ministry of Education. They were mandated to prepare a National Action Plan for the delivery of EFA in Nigeria.

**The State of Education in Nigeria; Issues on the Provision of Free Education**

Enoch [1996] pointed that education for national development should develop the individual, equip recipients with necessary attitudes, knowledge, skills and discover the gifted in the society and develop the spirit of self-reliance as well as inculcate problem-solving and survival skills. It should also aim at preserving a healthy social structure by emphasizing intrinsic values, building a united, democratic and dynamic nation which is socially stable and technologically equipped. It should be made accessible to all qualified citizens and in order to achieve these, it must maintain an efficient system.

Based on the above statement, we must agree that educational reforms, training and human resource development are integral parts of a market economy. Nigeria has made progress in all these areas since educational reforms began, but Nigeria's economy is based on oil generated revenue. The government so depended on oil revenue that it forgot to venture into other sources of revenue generators such as agriculture, mining, tourism, etc.

Consequently, the severe decline in the oil market in the eighties and nineties led to the drastic reduction in spending on education. This resulted in non-payment of teachers' salaries, degradation of educational facilities at all levels and strikes in schools and universities. The end result was gradual and steadily deteriorating of literacy level in the country especially among the 15-24 age groups.

Nevertheless, the poor state of education in Nigeria was captured in the National Empowerment Development Strategy as follow; ...the delivery of education in Nigeria has suffered from years of neglect compounded by inadequate attention to policy framework within the sector.

Similarly, according to the Nigeria Millennium Development Goals report [2005] literacy level in the country has deteriorated

especially among the 15-24 age groups. Also, there is glaring imbalance against girls' enrollment, attendance and completion rates in all levels of education particularly in the Northern Nigeria. This is due to a variety of socio-cultural and religious factors. Also, there are acute shortage of infrastructure and facilities at all levels. There is wide disparity in education standards and learning achievement. The system emphasized theoretical knowledge at the expense of technical, vocational and entrepreneurial education.

Moreover, the unprecedented demographic shifts and growth of population all over the world and the recent transitions of world economy from agriculture and manufacturing to information and technology, now to biogenetics have sent the right messages to all stakes-holders in an effort to bring change in the existing culture of managing the free education programmes.

Another study conducted by Action Aid (2003) showed that the reasons why pupils do not go to primary schools include:

- (a) Costs of schooling which include costs of books, stationery and basic equipment, uniforms, admission fees, registration and examination fees, contribution towards building and maintenance fund, transportation, mid-day meals, Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) fees, sports fees, library fees and extra tuition fees.
- (b) The opportunity cost for parents sending children to school is the children's time that could have been of economic importance to the family either or terms of income generating activities or in supporting the functioning of the household.
- (c) Illness and hunger either of the children themselves or members of the family can prevent children from going to school.

- (d) Limited economic benefits in terms of the fact that those who have completed school have no job do dissuade people from going to school.
- (e) Finally, low quality of schooling particularly with regards to poor physical infrastructure, lack of motivated staff, poor utilization of resources, content of curriculum, nature of teaching methods and relationship of school and teachers with the wider community can negatively impact on the urge to go to school.

Regrettably, the 1991 national census recorded that there has been a continuous increase in Nigeria population from 118.8 million in 2001 to 126.2 million in 2003 and 140 Million in 2006. A research by Action Aid Group (2003) showed that whenever user fees are introduced in provision of social services, the utilization by the rich increases while utilization by the poor decreases. In Western Nigeria When there was free education, the number of pupil going to school were greater in number than the number in the Eastern part of the country where school fees were paid. Likewise in Malawi for instance, two years after fees were introduced into school system in 1980s, enrolment rates fell by over 5%. Conversely, it has been documented that whenever users fees were abolished, enrolment increases. Another example is Tanzania which eliminated fees for primary schools in January 2002 with the support of the World Bank had enrolment surge by as much as 1.5million children.

It should be noted also that scrapping fees without a major increase in public financing can have a disastrous impact on quality of education and it is unsustainable. It is therefore necessary that whenever fees are abolished, efforts should be made towards reforming revenue and budget, also there is the need to train and employ more teachers, build new classrooms, renovate dilapidated classrooms and provide more facilities to meet the increase enrolment.

There is also the problem of irrelevant curriculum: it is a shame that close to 50years after independence our primary school children are still taught in social science class that Mungo Park discovered the River Niger. This is the very river our forefathers have been collecting water from. He maybe the first European to sail on it but not to discover it.

Another problem is the constant change of educational policies. Whenever a government takes over power, it changes the policy to suit itself. This has been a major headache for investors who are always scared to invest in educational sector in Nigeria. In 2006, approval was given by the National Council on Education (NCE) for the abolition of federal and state common entrance examination for placement into junior secondary schools and the issuance of a standardized universal basic education certificate at the end of the nine year basic education. Today what is happening? Pupils are still taking National Common Entrance Examination. Sometime ago, the Federal Government Colleges were bound from admitting new students for some years, it was the Yar,dua's administration that change that policy, pupils are still taking Common Entrance Examination into Junior secondary schools. Sometime ago, the Obasanjo administration band Federal Government Colleges from admitting new students, it was the Yar,dua's administration that changed that policy, Federal Government Colleges have started admitting new students.

The Federal government in pursuance of its commitment to achieve education for all and the millennium development goals initiated the home grown school feeding and health programme in 2005, that programme was targeted at providing equal opportunities

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and access to free education to all Nigerian children by reducing hunger and improving their health and nutritional status. This initiative has long become history.

Meanwhile, free education was tried in Nigeria in the 70s, and it worked for sometime before it was abolished. For government to achieve the aim and objectives of setting up free education, it must be financed by federal, state and local governments, NGOs and international donors. If the work is left for one tier of government it cannot last. Borno State is a very good example, in the Eastern part of the country Ebonyi State during the reign of Governor Sam Egwu is another good example. Such a move tends to reduce the constant use of children in causing riot, hawking and different types of child abuse; also it will boost development and increase gender equality.

**Recommendations**

With reference to the identified constraint in the current National Policy on Education for functional and self reliance: issues for free education the following recommendation are proffered

- a. Corruption in the educational sector should be completely reduced. This will ensure that available fund for a free education programme is not misappropriated for private use.
- b. In view of the fact that budget allocation for education has been reduced as a result of dwindling incomes from oil due to the global economic crisis, every hand must be on deck to generate additional sources of revenue to aid educational programmes.
- c. Federal, State, Local Government, NGO's, Local and International donors and private sectors must contribute to education tax fund, which should be managed from the centre
- d. Those concerned with the responsibility of implementing the free education programme must ensure that effectiveness and efficiency of scarce education resources are adhered to.

- e. The political structure of the country should be designed to contain an inbuilt stabilizer that will not affect the policy on educations programme even if there a change from one government to another.
- f. Government should provide jobs for school leavers or give loan to them to start small scale business.
- g. Cost of schooling should be taken care of by government, pupils should be band from paying different types of fees, they should be taught hand craft, balanced mid-day meal should be re-introduced into schools to minimized illness and hunger.

**Conclusion**

Nigeria is blessed with different mineral resources, fertile land, and large human population. The amount of revenue generated from all these resources should be enough to provide free education at all levels. Corruption has eaten deep into our system, it is practiced without minding who gets hurt or not. With the kind of money this country generates from oil alone, every Nigerian is supposed to have access to free and qualitative education at all levels. The issue of rebranding Nigeria has to start from individual mind, the worst thing that can happen to any human being is for that person to tell himself a lie, once we start telling ourselves the truth, our problem will be solved. Free education is a very sensitive issue that must be address properly. All that is needed is for people from all works of life to rise up to the challenges and bring a change to our educational sector, by putting education in its right footing.

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