

CURRICULUM REFORM IN NIGERIA: A MYTH OR A REALITY?

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Abstract

Curriculum can be defined in several ways, as a group of subjects, as total offerings in a school system, or as a reflection of societal thinking on its aims for educating its citizens. Which ever definition is used, the primary purpose of curriculum is to offer activities and experiences that will benefit the learner and the larger society. Curriculum is a dynamic concept, with change inherent in its structure, theory and practice. Every society that has an educational system of a formal kind must necessarily have periodic reforms of its curriculum to reflect changes internally and externally. Nigeria is not left out in this dynamic view of curriculum. This paper briefly reviewed curriculum theory, curriculum reform and antecedents, and then asked the question whether curriculum reform is a myth or a reality in Nigeria. It contended that even though in some cases the implementation of curriculum reforms render the intentions and efforts suspect and thus imaginary or mythical, several instances and institutions exist that prove that curriculum reform is indeed a reality in Nigeria and is a continuing process which must be encouraged for the benefit of the learners and the general society.

Introduction

Change is inherent in life. As a matter of fact, it is an aphorism that the only thing in life that is permanent is change. Curriculum has to do with the content of offerings in an educational system of a society. Because society is in a state of flux, it is constantly being subjected to internal developments and, or external influences. These generate an in-built logic that necessitate or even impose the need for change in the content of what is taught to youths in particular, and other learners in general, for their individual development and for survival cum growth of the group. Curriculum therefore must be seen as dynamic, else society stagnates and atrophies.

This paper briefly reviews some concepts of 'adjustments' to curricula and goes on to attempt an answer to the poser, is curriculum reform in Nigeria a myth or a reality? It is the position of this paper that because society is dynamic, curriculum which according to Husen & Postlethwaite, (1985: 1139) is that portion of the content of a culture that is transmissible through learning cannot be static.

The Concept of Curriculum

There are not too many concepts in education theory that are assumed to be easy to understand, yet a simple and commonly acceptable definition is hard to come by Maduka (1994:41- 42) observes that "the term curriculum has been subjected to a bewildering variety of definitions by the various constituencies in education. This assertion is true because there are many schools of thought on the concept. Some educationists regard curriculum as basically a group of subjects or courses offered in an academic setting which generally lead to the award of degrees, diplomas or certificates to the learners. Others use the phrase "Programme of Studies," a rather narrow perspective, to mean curriculum. Yet others adopt a focused approach such that curriculum is any of three approaches - subject centred, which regards curriculum as a list of different school subjects; society centred which is of the opinion that curriculum consists of all activities in a school setting directed and aimed at effecting change in the student.

Two of the approaches appear to form the pedestal for the definition by Tanner & Tanner (1975:35) According to them, curriculum is:

A planned and guided learning experience and learning outcomes formulated through the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experience under the auspices of the school for the learners' continuous growth in personal-social competence.

This definition identifies curriculum as planned, and then guided in a school setting

much emphasis is placed on the role of curriculum in getting learners to use their experiences to impact on the society.

Chapman (1978) condenses the approaches by observing that curriculum is a written statement outlining educational goals and the means of achieving them. This implies in the first place, that curriculum has to be documented, which appears to preclude traditional or informal education as having a curriculum. The definition also takes note of the need to outline educational goals as well as the means of achieving them. This takes care of different views and approaches to curriculum planning, development and even instruction.

Curriculum however needs to be seen, from whichever approach or vista, as comprising activities other than academic 'subjects' or 'courses'. Development of the learner's should be mental, physical, physiological, psychological and even spiritual and emotional for a complete or rounded personality to emerge. Thus engagements such as sports, games, religious worship, clubs and even students politics (government) must be regarded as *de facto* curriculum offerings rather than under the misnomer "extra-curricula activities." These aspects are so important in the development of the learners' overall personality that the University of Nigeria indicates in her degree certificates that graduates of the institution have been found "worthy in character and in learning" to be admitted into the specific degree. Character development necessarily involves academic and non-academic experiences. Recent approach is to describe these purely non-academic offerings as "co-curricular".

Curriculum Reform in Perspective

Just as the term curriculum appears not to have a standard definition, so is the activity of effecting changes in an existing curriculum. Terms often used interchangeably include curriculum development, review, change, innovation and reform.

Husen & Postlethwaite (1985) contend that curriculum development entails the selection and organisation of intended learning outcomes. Wokocho (1993:30), defines curriculum development as the "planning of learning opportunities intended to bring about certain changes in pupils and the assessment of the extent to which these changes have taken place. This definition has two important components - planning of learning opportunities, and evaluation. Curriculum development is therefore a process which involves planning and evaluation.

The New Webster's Dictionary (1995-851) regards review as "a general consideration of past events or situation," "a re-examination of a decision", "a critical evaluation" of say a book, and "to consider again" (p. 851). All these vistas amount to the same thing - evaluation or re-evaluation of something past, including decisions. Curriculum review therefore takes into consideration one of the components indicated by Wokocho, that is, evaluation.

Curriculum change is defined as "any alteration in any of the aspects of curriculum. Husen & Postlethwaite (1985) note that where there is "intrinsic newness", it becomes innovation. Curriculum change apparently does not necessarily include follow-up. This implies that if the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) for instance injects a new course or topic in a subject into the syllabus, there is change or innovation, but they need not follow up (as is verily the case) to ensure that the target - the pupils - benefit.

Curriculum reform is therefore more far reaching than curriculum development. It agrees with curriculum review in that questions are asked which in essence is questioning the past and the present with a view to improving the future. Curriculum reform, like all reforms, involves serious, sometimes drastic and dramatic changes which would have nationwide and sector-wide implications. Seen in this light, reform is not an ad-hoc exercise but one which requires the time and attention of experts who should use a multi-disciplinary approach to ensure success while also warding off negative, unintended consequences. It is evident therefore, that programmes such as Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Basic Education (UBE), Nomadic Education and others are good examples of curriculum reform because they have socio-political, economic and cultural implications, and are not ad-hoc in nature but programmes with expected far reaching, sustainable and with enduring impact on the society. In this paper, reform and review will be used interchangeably because both recognise critical re-appraisal as a basis for change.

Curriculum in The Nigerian Educational System-Antecedents and Precursors

Prior to British rule, the curriculum in the Nigerian educational system was culture-oriented and informal (Obomanu, 1999). The curriculum, (or rather curricula as different communities had theirs), though not documented, provided for the objectives of traditional education which include development of character and the latent physical and intellectual skills of the child as well as cultivation of vocational skill, community consciousness, respect for elders and cultural orientation (Fafunwa in Obomanu, 1999).

The curriculum of the Nigerian educational system inevitably reflected that of the British following the commencement of colonialism. The curriculum of the colonial era according to Obomanu (ibid) had the following features.

Lack of specific or general objectives

Knowledge was for knowledge's sake

Content was pure theory, with little or no emphasis on practical application.

There was no emphasis on the sciences which meant a limitation on technological development.

Emphasis was on the priority areas of the colonialists. This included the 3Rs (Reading Writing, Arithmetic) and religion, the former, apparently to provide clerical manpower and to ease communication, the latter, probably to each control of the people and to develop morality. The postindependence era saw the strident call for, and the urgent need for review of the curriculum to suit the expectations of Nigerians and indeed the world. The immediate post-independence period also saw a world-wide drive towards change in curriculum following the launching of the first manned flight into space by the Soviet Union with that country's Yuri Gagarin becoming the first man in space. This challenge was taken up by the United States of America under President John F. Kennedy. It meant a drastic review of the curriculum which saw even artisans being brought into the formal school system.

In Nigeria, the world-wide movement could not be ignored. It was for instance during this period that the Ashby Commission made its famous Report on Higher Education in Nigeria. Though most of the reviews by the different panels were on a wide range of issues, they nevertheless dwell on curriculum.

Institutions Involved In Curriculum Reviews

Curriculum review is a continuous process. In Nigeria, certain statutory or extra, ministerial bodies are vested with the task of continually reviewing the curriculum. These are:

- The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council - this organ took over the functions of the Nigerian Educational Research Council (NERC), the Nigerian Book Development Council (NBDC), the Comparative Education & Adaptation Centre (CESAC) and the National Language Centre. It was established by Decree No. 53 of 1988 and has among other duties, the development of curricula at all levels of the school system: establishment of new techniques and approaches to curriculum development;
- National Universities Commission (NUC) - established in 1992 following the recommendations of the Ashby Commission, the Commission oversees among several other tasks in the university system, the development of curriculum at that level.
- National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) - established in 1977 by Decree No. 9, it has the duty of managing Colleges of Technology and polytechnics including determination of curriculum at that level.
- National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) - established by Decree No. 3 of 1989, aside from coordinating the administration of all Colleges of Education both private and public, sees to the development of curriculum at that level.

West African Examinations Council (WACE) - this regional examinations body was established in 1962. It reviews school syllabi periodically, where syllabus is an aspect of curriculum (subjects).

- Science Teachers Association of Nigeria (STAN) - was founded in 1957. Its curriculum development effort commenced in 1968 when it constituted Curriculum Development Committees for science subjects - biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics - cooperation with CESAC and the Federal Ministry of Education. STAN also works hand in hand with WAEC.
- Nigerian Teachers Institute (NTI) - a parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Education, the NTI influences the development of teachers and the curriculum thereof particularly at the primary school level. It was established by Decree No. 7 of 1978 and its Head Office is at Kaduna. It was set up following the explosion of student population in processes and to upgrade the skills of unqualified teachers (Jakande, 1990).
- National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB) - the body organises examinations and influences curriculum at the secondary school level for business and technical subjects. The Head Office is at Benin, Edo State.

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Hornby (1997:770) states that a myth is regarded as “a story that originated in ancient times, especially one concerning the early history of a people, “or “ a thing or person that is imaginary, or not true. Reality on the other hand is a noun, the adjective being ‘real’, which has the meaning “existing as a thing or occurring as a fact; not imagined, supposed or pretended” (Hornby, 1997:968).

The two views of the word ‘myth’ as stated by Hornby can be applied in curriculum reform. As earlier indicated under antecedents, Nigeria had a curriculum of sorts - traditional - which was not documented at the early stages but still had a consistent approach to the education of children, preparing them for their role in the future both as individuals and as citizens. As to whether curriculum reform is imaginary or untrue is the subject of this paper. It is however, the position of this paper that curriculum reform in Nigeria is largely a reality. Our grounds:

With respect to formal (western) education of which the definition of curriculum is anchored, curriculum reform as a myth would imply that the country is still operating the curriculum of the colonial days. But this is not the case, for the different Commissions that have worked on change in the educational system have generated the current status of the curriculum.

The first far reaching report that substantially affected the curriculum in Nigeria was the Phelps-Stokes Report of 1923. Sponsored by an American, Miss Caroline Phelps-Stokes, the Report criticized the educational system as then was, noting that it was “based on books.” (Adesina, 1988). This was a reference to the theoretical nature of content to the detriment of the vocations. Education at that time was geared towards production of clerical personnel for the colonial administration thus subjects such as Classics, English Language, Latin and others under the Humanities predominated. The Phelps-Stokes Report specifically advocated vocational subjects so as to take care of an emerging developing nation. It is pertinent to state this Report evidently led to the first education law in Nigeria as a corporate entity - the Education Ordinance of 1926 (Adesina, 1988).

The Ashby Commission Report of 1960 was specifically on higher education. The Reports led to changes in the curriculum at that level.

Other Reports were on specific aspects such as funding, as in the Onabamiro and Eke Reports. The Elliot Commission Report of 1943 pre-dated that of Ashby.

According to Mkpa (1987), the curriculum of the colonial period lasted for over a century. It was the NERC which led the way in curriculum reform when it convened the National Curriculum Conference in 1969. Following the Conference.

- May, 1971 - National Primary-Education Curriculum Workshop which came out with Guidelines on Primary School Curriculum in 1973.

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April 1972 - National Workshop on Teacher Education Curriculum which released the guidelines on Grade II Teacher Education Curriculum in 1974.

1973/74 — National Secondary Education Curriculum Workshop which reviewed curriculum at the secondary school level. All of the above were incorporated in the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977.

The NPE, the pre-eminent document on education in Nigeria, was first released in 1977 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. A revised edition was published in 1981 and another in 1998.

Though not directly educational, the various National Development plans have affected curriculum reform. It is however the 2nd National Development plan (1970-74) that has been most important in the educational system. It is from this document that the philosophy of Nigerian education was drawn; that is, the 5 national objectives which form the basis of the philosophy of Nigerian education.

The Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976 and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of 1999 (the two launched on 6th September 1976 and 31st September 1999 respectively by the same Head of the Federal Government General Obasanjo) are concrete cases of a drive for curriculum reform. The UBE in particular is expected to have far-reaching effect on content, as the Junior Secondary School III (JSS III) is planned as the terminal point for some children and thus the curriculum has to reflect the need to provide enough for graduates of that level to be able to make a living as individuals while also making contributions in the society.

The 6-3-3-4 system apparently borrowed from the United States of America and Japan (Ubong, 2000) is probably the most important in terms of direct reference to curriculum. Prior to its introduction, a system of 6-5-4 was in use, that is, 6 years at the primary level, 5 at the secondary and 3-4 years at the university level. The extension of the secondary school to 6 years of 3 each at junior and senior secondary levels meant a change in curriculum. The curriculum is designed such that those who stop their education at the JSS III can still live a good life. Unfortunately the implementation has not been in line with plans, a classic example being that the JSS certificate is virtually non-functional. This is one case in which curriculum reform can be regarded as a myth. For the ideal remains imaginary.

Below the Federal level, it is necessary to mention the efforts of the Western and Eastern regional governments in 1955 and 1957 respectively with respect to UPE. The efforts involved curriculum reform.

The introduction at various times, of new subjects including Nigerian languages, is an aspect of curriculum reform. Nigerian youths are for instance, expected to learn their local language as well as at least one of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Again, whether this change, which has political and cultural undertones, has been practicalised puts it under the myth of reform.

It is at the tertiary level that curriculum reform is most active. In Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education, curriculum reviews take place at least every 5 years after which it is formalised as minimum standard (eg, the NCCE had one in 1990 and another in 1996. A new one is currently being processed).

At the secondary level, WAEC in particular at least until recently, had the monopoly of reviewing curriculum which is made public via the syllabus. The review by WAEC deserves some comment. At the secondary school level, the WAEC syllabus is virtually a Bible. It circumscribes teaching and learning, including reading of books, as teachers and students appear to limit themselves to WAEC prescribed texts. If curriculum review is looked at from the point of view of radical change not just in principle or on paper but in actuality on the learner, curriculum reform becomes a myth in the WAEC case because the frequent reviews tend to limit the learning scope of students.

To institute curriculum reform, the NPE (FRN, 1981) indicated that Federal and State governments have to set up curriculum development centres with the NERDC performing a coordinating role. This is currently the case. Each state has a

development centre which handles matter like monitoring curriculum content in schools. Also, the centres review all texts recommended for use in primary and junior secondary schools so as to ensure that they are in line with the curriculum expectations.

Summary And Conclusion

Curriculum reform refers to extensive changes in the curriculum. It is expected to have political and sometimes ideological dimensions. In Nigeria, there are identifiable cases of deliberate effort towards reform either periodically or sporadically. Though the implementation of reform efforts render the reality of the efforts suspect, the fact remains that the Nigerian educational system is not running on the colonial curriculum of pre-independence; certainly not on the traditional curriculum of pre-colonization; nor on the curriculum of the immediate post-independence years. Reform is a continuous exercise and for any curriculum to remain relevant, it must be reviewed periodically. Better still, whatever is arrived at needs to be implemented for the good of the learner and the society. Here would lie the reality of curriculum reform.

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