

RESTRUCTURING THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: FOCUS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper focused on the Nigerian Educational system and the state of childhood Education. It noted, that the structure of formal Education system in Nigeria has four levels, namely, pre-primary, secondary (junior and senior) and tertiary. It noted that education in Nigeria is no more a private enterprise but a huge government venture that has witness a progressive evaluation of complete government intervention and active participation. It takes a critical look at the situation of the national policy on education in general as reference point. The paper discusses Nigerian Educational system with reference to the state of the childhood Education, the Nigeria National objectives with respect to primary education, the history of educational development in Nigeria, conclusion and recommendations.

The Nigerian Educational System and State of Childhood Education; Matters Arising

The structure of formal educational system in Nigeria has four levels, namely: Pre-primary, Primary, Secondary (Junior and Senior) and Tertiary. In the National Policy on Education (1982), the stipulated age for primary education is between 3 and

5 + years. Primary education in Nigeria is given to children aged between 6 to 11 + and lasts for 6 years. Children proceed at age 12 to junior secondary school which lasts 3 years. The second (tier senior secondary school) is designed for students between the ages of 15 and 18 and the length of studies is 3 years. The final tier of the formal programme which comprises colleges of education, universities, professional institutions and polytechnics is designed for students between 18 and 22 years and above and the duration of studies ranges from 3 to 7 years, according to the nature of the course (FGN, 1996).

Pre- primary education is the education given in an educational institution to children aged from 3 to under 6 years prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the kindergarten, playgroup and nursery schools. Pre-primary education has the main purpose of;

- a. Effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school
- b. Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices etc)
- c. Preparing the child for the primary level of education
- d. Inculcating social norms;
- e. Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities, etc.
- f. Teaching co-operation and team spirit;
- g. Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes forms etc/through play.
- h. Teaching good habits, especially good health habits.

The curriculum at pre-primary school is broad and the range of subjects offered is quite wide. It focuses on English language, mathematics (Arithmetic), Nigerian language, writing, reading, rhymes, social studies, music, singing and elementary science/ nature study.

Pre-primary education in Nigeria is purely and entirely informal, left in the hands of private operators, the parents and the local community. Lawal, (2003) the responsibilities of government for pre-primary education are therefore to promote the training of qualified pre-primary school teachers in adequate number, contribute to the development of a suitable curriculum and supervise and control the quality of such institutions (FGN, 1996).

Primary education refers to the education given in an institution for children aged 6 to 11 years plus. Since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary level is key to success or failure of the education system as a whole. Equally, primary education is at the heart of the concept of basic education which is the dominant idea behind the concept of universal education, its goals are centered around functional literacy and numeracy and the inculcation of positive attitudes towards cooperation, work community and national development and continued knowledge.

The primary school curriculum is discipline based, and is addressed to all the goals of primary education, permanent literacy and numeracy and communication skills are top priority while the curriculum covers language studies, primary sciences.

The Nigeria national objectives with respect to primary education were to:

- a. Increased primary education access to benefit 90% of eligible age group by year 2000
- b. Increase primary education completion rate from 50% to at least 70% by the year 2000
- c. Reduce gender in gross enrolment 17.3% in 1990 to at least 5% by the year 2000
- d. Assess minimum level of learning achievement and improve performances of primary school children relatively.
- e. Increase role of local communities in planning, management and monitoring of primary education.
- f. Promote the linkage programme to improve early child access to primary education.
- g. Increase access to primary education for adolescent girls
- h. Increase access of families/communities to primary/basic education (FGN, 1996)

Early childhood education does not only provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents at work as stated in the national policy on education, but is meant to prepare children physically.

Emotionally, social and mentally for the first grade class of primary school. This preparation is considered the foundation for further psychological development. These significant reasons justify the need for early childhood education programme. However, one wonders why early child nursery education is not a priority of national government at the implementation stage, because 99% of early child nursery school found in our environment are established and managed by private proprietors. In situations where governments are involved, it is largely the initiative of tertiary institution and parastatals that operate this early phase of education purely as staff welfare provision observed Lar (2009).

The philosophy of early childhood education is largely child centered education. Therefore, play is an important focus. Play enables children to actively explore, manipulate and interact with their environment. It encourages children to investigate, create and discovered. The play process also motivate them to take risk and add to understanding of the world. It uses concrete materials and demonstration with activities which create authentic experience making children have sense of mastery over their environment. The philosophy agrees with Piaget's ideas that children should actively participate in their world and various environments so as to ensure that they are not 'passive' learner's but little 'scientist' who are actively engaged. A child who is undergoing education is also expected to learn subject like

English language, mathematics, Nigeria language, writing, reading, rhymes, social studies, Music and elementary science/nature study.

Importance of early childhood education for many reason, early childhood education is a phase that has come to intervene to meet the need of working class women. In most countries, including Nigeria, education has been the traditional means by which people has improved their prospect for productivity and satisfying live. Early childhood education, according to UNESCO (2006), helps to build the psycho-social foundation needed for childhood to undertake abstract learning later in primary school. Children who are not privileged to go through early childhood education do not develop the skills. Habit and attitude expected of the average child in primary one. This lack of development results in low score in low scores in preparedness for school makes them academically compared to their counterpart who have the privilege to start at the nursery stage of education. Early childhood/nursery education no matter how short promote holistic development; which include good health, nutrition and a nurturing environment for smooth transition to primary school. Intellectual, social, physical and emotional aspects of education are also included in the curriculum of the early childhood/nursery system which helps to foster all round development. With social skills the children learn to share and feelings. Others skill such as language mastery help the child to learn to express his or her thought and feelings verbally in a clear and appropriate manner. Childhood education is therefore very important because it promotes the child's holistic development and therefore should be given due consideration.

Rural Childhood Education, Reforms and Rural Development in Nigeria

The history of educational development in Nigeria is replete with various attempts at innovations and reform. The universal primary education (UPE) programme in the western (1955) and eastern (1957) regions of the country, the free UPE of the federal government (1972), the development and adoption of the national policy on education in 180s along with the accompanying 6-3-3-4 system of education, and the current universal basic education (UBN) which commenced in 199 provided a frame work upon which desired changes in the educational structure were premised.

Perhaps the main innovation in Nigeria post-independent educational development was the 6-3-3-4 education services for Nigeria children especially at the secondary level by arousing interest in technological and vocational education though actual exposure at a rudimentary level. One of the most significant aspects of this system of education is the introduction of continuous assessment in the determination of results, a practice that is still used today. (Adamu, 2003).

The most recent initiatives today is known as the universal basic education (UBE) programme. According to the document submitted by the country to the 45th UNESCO conference on education, basic education in the Nigeria context is to be understood as education aimed at equipping individual-child, youth and adult with

such knowledge and skills to enable him to develop to his fullness capacity, derive maximum social economic and cultural benefits from his membership of social and fulfilled civic obligation, the primary focus, however, is on the provision of universal, compulsory and free education for the first nine years of every child's schooling up till the end of the junior secondary school. The policy is designed to ensure 100% transition from the primary to the junior secondary level and to ensure the children remain long enough in school to acquire basic competencies and life skills (FGN, 1996).

The objective of the nine years schooling scheme are:

- a. To widen access to basic education
- b. To eliminate present inequalities in enrolment e.g. between boys and girls and also between rural and urban children
- c. To ensure greater retention, and
- d. To ensure long-term permanent literacy for children who have passed through the system

The extended time of compulsory education (from six to nine years) and the enriched curricular (inclusion/integration of computer, population and environment education) were expected to contribute to higher level of education achievement that will accelerate the eradication of illiteracy in Nigeria.

Recently in pursuit of this programme, a Pivotal Teacher Training Programme (PTTP) was enacted to rapidly produce teachers that government felt were desperately needed for the success of the programme. Some other innovation reforms that are also being carried out giving priority attention to marginalized groups, such as girls, nomads, migrant fishermen, street and handicapped children, introduction of the Nigeria Certificate in Education as the minimum qualification for teaching in primary schools, focusing attention on the production of more and better teachers including the establishment in December 1994 by Lagos state Government of a specialized college of primary Education, ensuring the provision of special funds for execution of education projects e.g. the Petroleum Trust Fund for Education Tax Fund and return of schools to the original owners mainly missionaries along with the encouragement of the establishment of schools by private entrepreneurs. With respect to the focus of this paper, a number of issues arise concerning these reforms. The first is the question of how effective they have been. Second is the issue of what factors constrains effectiveness and third relates to how they have addressed the rural-urban disparities inherent in the educational system.

And that reforms have had little impact on education in the rural area is confirmed by the fact that the standard of education in most rural communities in Nigeria remains poor till date. This was noted by Anyaegbu et al (2004) thus

Nigeria has struggled for many years with the development with the development of rural education... (But), little to no result has occurred, and the people in rural areas in the country remain for the most part, uneducated. In as much as the government has attempted to put the nation's educational system into shape,

education in the rural areas has not been given-proper attention as it has been in the cities. Such neglect has continue to leave Nigerian rural education in shambles;

Effecting appropriate changes in the rural education system should start with the education of the rural child. The reasons for this are not farfetched;

- i. Rural children are the most affected by the socio-cultural factors of rural areas that act as impediments to educational development. Such factors include involvement in full time farm work at too early age and relatively for too long such that little time become available for school work; relatively little motivation for academic for academic excellence vis-à-vis urban children due to poverty than other social groups in the rural areas due to lower access to livelihood assets. These hinder academic performance, encourage absenteeism and high dropout rate and create social, physical and psychological stress that tends to hinder development later in life.
- ii. Children are not only the most impressionable; they are also the adults of tomorrow. They therefore constitute the primary agent for the transmission, propagation and sustenance of rural development measure over time.

From an economic point of view, Norton and Alwang (2007) posited that rural education is an investment in in people that has two main objectives namely, (i) improving agricultural productivity and (ii) preparing children for nonformal occupations if they have to leave farming thus highlighting the importance of children in a system of rural education. Rural education promotes agricultural sectors in the rural areas as some rural children emerge latter as food processors, rural entrepreneurs and industrialists.

To be effective, the required reforms in rural childhood education should cover such aspect as; innovations in the educational delivery process; restructuring of the institutional and regulatory arrangement; and development of appropriate financing arrangements, among others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The failure of any educational system to fulfill the objective for which it was established is often the precondition for calls for its reform. In order for people to feel at any particular moment in time the need to change its education system, it is necessary that new ideas and needs have emerged in which the formal system is no longer adequate. Such new ideas and needs can be internally induced by external Such is the case in Nigeria where key reforms in childhood educational system are invariably tied with the state of the economy or else they wither away. The history of educational development in Nigeria is replete with various attempts at innovations and reforms, the major ones being the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in the Western (1955) and Eastern (1975) regions of the country, the free UPE of the Federal Government (1972), the development and adoption of the national policy on education in the 1980s along with the accompanying 6-3-3-4 system of

education, and the current Universal Basic Education (UBE) which commenced in 1999.

Towards improving the system, the following recommendations are hereby proffered

1. Development of an institutional arrangement for government support (technical, infrastructural and /or financial) of childhood education entrepreneurs in the rural areas to encourage and develop private initiatives in the field.
2. Formation of an association of rural childhood practitioners coupled with a centre for research on rural childhood education and to encourage specialized extensive research and discourse on the issues of childhood education in rural area and develop professionals in the area.
3. Development of appropriate legal and political arrangement for early childhood education distinct from that of primary education. In other words, recognition of early childhood education care and education as a distinct and specialized area of the education of the child, and thus the evolvement of an arrangement for training of specialist teachers in early child care and education and subsequent professional of same.
4. Extensive awareness creation/parental education programme for rural dwellers on all aspects of childhood education.
5. Development of adequate capacity for initiating, planning in the education sector.
6. Provision of an improved reward scheme of teachers in rural areas. The rural inducement allowances can be enhanced or improved in order to attract the best hands to the rural areas.

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