

SCHOOL - COMMUNITY RELATIONS: AN IMPERATIVE FOR REFOCUSING PRIMARY EDUCATION FOR RELIANCE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines school and community relations as an imperative for refocusing primary education in Nigeria. In doing this, the paper looks at the goals of primary education, which should be a gateway to achieving relevance and sustainable national development. The present state of primary education is discussed and the need to refocus it. The paper suggests strategies for refocusing the curriculum, teacher training and retraining, provision of infrastructure/facilities and information and communication technology through school - community relations. Some recommendations are also made.

Introduction

Education has been broadly seen as the means through which the society inducts the child into the acceptable way of life. This connotes a moulding of the child's behaviour to conform to what is accepted as valuable by the society. Gbamanja (2002), views education as having the primary responsibility for preserving and transmitting the cultures to the young ones, transforming or meaningfully changing the culture and developing the individual's potentials. When the potentials of the individual are developed, he can contribute meaningfully to himself and the society at large. United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) views education as instruction that is organized sustained and designed to communicate to the individual, knowledge, skills and understanding, which are valuable for all life activities. The knowledge and skills, which an individual acquires through education, equips him to contribute to the development of the nation. Thus, education is an instrument for national development.

This is properly elucidated in Nigeria's philosophy of education (FRN, 2004:6), which states that:

- a) education is an instrument for national development; to this end, the formulation of ideas, their integration for national development, and the interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education;
- b) education fosters the worth and, development of the individual, for each individual's sake, and for the general development of the society;
- c) every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his ability; and
- d) there is need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive, united Nigeria; to this end school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive, while interest and ability should determine the individual's direction in education.

The 6-3-3-4 system of education presently in use is geared towards providing the type of education that would be relevant, bring about self-reliance, leading to national development. It was aimed at moving the nation away from theoretical and certificate oriented education whose graduates usually relied on government for employment, thus, the emphasis of the 6-3-3-4 system on crafts, pre-vocational and vocational subjects. Such subjects should help graduates to create jobs, be self-reliant and contribute to sustainable national development.

The bedrock of all these laudable objectives is the first level (6) of the educational system, which is the primary school. It is education given (o children between six and eleven years old. It is at this stage that they acquire foundational understanding, knowledge, skills and abilities on which the other levels of education will build, ultimately leading to national development.

The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) proposes a primary education that will be functional from the onset; however it is apparent that the goals of primary-education have not been attained. The products of primary education are hardly literate and numerate and unable to communicate effectively which is just one of the goals of primary education. How then, will they be to have a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking or adapt to the changing environment among other things. The human and material resources for preparing them for trades and crafts are either lacking or inadequate. This has brought about the need to refocus primary education. This would involve rethinking, redirecting, re-engineering and revitalizing primary education to effectively achieve its aims and objectives.

Refocusing primary education will involve revisiting such areas as curriculum design and

implementation, teacher training and retraining, provision of infrastructure and facilities. To do this effectively the school and community have to come into partnership. This is because education is a co-operative and lifelong process (Iloh and Edozie, 2005). The school and community being major stakeholder in education must participate actively in re focusing primary education.

Goals of Primary Education

Primary denotes that which comes first in a series (Sykes, 1982). It is the prime, first or preparatory stage of something. Thus primary education is the preparatory or first stage of education where the child is taught the rudimentary knowledge and skills to prepare him for higher levels of education and for meaningful life in the society.

Primary education is therefore a very important level of education even as it is pivotal. In realization of this fact, Nigeria through the National Policy on Education fashioned out very laudable goals for primary education. They are to:

- a) inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;
- b) lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- c) give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- d) mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;
- e) develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
- f) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity; and
- g) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality (FRN, 2004:4).

In order to achieve these goals, the government proposed that primary education shall be tuition free, universal and compulsory. This is an attempt to provide equal educational access to all which is part of the millennium development goals (MDGs). The children from low socio-economic family backgrounds will thus be afforded the opportunity to be educated at this level.

The primary school curriculum specified subjects such as local language, mathematics, science, creative arts and computer education, which are all relevant to the current global social milieu and a pathway to sustainable development. In addition, teaching method is supposed to be practical, exploratory and experimental.

The language of instruction in the first three years should be the language of the environment with English language as a school subject. In the fourth year English will then be progressively used as the language of instruction with the local language and French as school subjects. All these goals are supposed to make for relevance and sustainable national development.

Achuonye (2007) has noted that, the primary school curriculum is quite relevant by its deliberate inclusion of academic skills into community realities. This avoids the error of past colonial curriculum and makes for a 'full integration of the individual into the community'. According to her. Relates viable community skills to the design of the formal school programme that draws subject content from the social and cultural life of the people; subject topics in history, geography, arts, health etc are now indigenous in nature, making learning more meaningful. The curriculum gives room for infusion of new materials and withdrawal of outdated ones (p. 199-200).

The curriculum offerings thus are relevant to the goals, aspirations and needs of the community. The graduate of primary education in Nigeria therefore ought to be equipped foundationally to fit into the society and contribute meaningfully to national development.

National development in Nigeria today is tied to the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) of 2004, It is geared towards re-orientation of our values, poverty eradication, job creation and employ men I generation and empowerment of people through education. NEEDS is also in line with the millennium development goals (MDGs) which Nigeria is signatory to. These are to:

- a) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,
- b) achieve universal primary education,
- c) promote gender equality and empowerment for women,
- d) reduce child mortality,
- e) improve maternal health,
- f) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and
- g) ensure environmental sustainability.

The issue of sustainability denotes ability to keep up a thing. The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), in Achuonye (2007), define sustainable development as that which meets the needs of (he present society and does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

Primary education therefore, is aimed at education that is relevant to the nation so that the present needs of the society can be met continuously and yet making allowance for future generations to meet their own needs. This then raises the question as to whether the aims and goals of primary education are being met.

Present State of Primary Education

The present state of primary education in Nigeria is of grave concern to educationists and society generally. The National policy on Education has already noted that the rest of the educational system is built on it and that it is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. Unfortunately, the laudable goals of primary education have not been met. The implementation of the system has been poorly carried out. Problems of primary schools deduced by Iloh and Edozie (2005) include:

- 1) reduction in school and instruction time owing to absenteeism and late coming by teachers and pupils,
- 2) inadequate/lack of lesson plans, teacher preparation, use of instructional materials and involvement of pupils,
- 3) poor teacher deployment leading to having more teachers in urban schools and lack of teachers in rural schools,
- 4) low level of skills in teaching areas such as Nigerian language and literacy,
- 5) lack of teacher retraining to keep them abreast of skills to face the current challenges of the environment,
- 6) irregular inspection of schools by designated ministry/parastatal,
- 7) children are engaged in street hawking and all forms of child labour when they ought to be in school, and
- 8) some children come to school poorly dressed, homework undone, having dangerous weapons, toys and negative values generally.

The state of primary education is actually a far cry from the stated objectives. The extent of -juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, examination malpractice (aided and abetted by parents, teachers, law enforcement agents, examination bodies, invigilators and schools), lack of funding and inadequacy of resources constitute a major problem. As observed by Enueme in Nwagwu (2003), most primary schools in Nigeria have dilapidated classrooms, inadequate classrooms, lack of writing desks and basic teaching aids and have poor unsanitary environments.

It is doubtful that, any meaningful learning can be carried out under this prevailing environment and conditions. Financing of primary education is actually a major problem, which creates so many other problems. Also, the promise of government to provide basic infrastructure and training for the realization of the goal of introducing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at the primary school level seem to have been almost forgotten.

The foregoing points to the urgent need to refocus primary education. It is necessary to find ways and means of revitalizing this level of education for relevance and sustainable national development.

School - Community Relations

The school is a major agency of education. It is an organized system created by the society to carry out the educational process. Thus, it serves (the interest of the society that has set it up).

The community refers to a group of people living in a given location and sharing the same goals and values. "It is an organized, municipal or social body" (Sykes, 1982:190). The school operates within the community and caters for the educational needs of the community. Thus, there is a co-operative relationship between the school and the community. Abraham (2002), in Okorosaye-Orubite (2005), views school - community relationship as a two-way symbiotic arrangement through which the school and the community co-operate with each other for the realization of the goals of the community via the school. This co-operation therefore, is to achieve the goals of education.

This paper thus proposes that the school and community should co-operate to refocus primary education in the areas of (the curriculum design, teacher training and retraining, provision of infrastructure/facilities and computer education (ICT)).

Strategies for Refocusing Primary Education

The strategies for refocusing the aspects of primary education already mentioned are as follows:

The Curriculum

A relevant curriculum ought to be based on the needs, desires and aspirations of the society (community). The content should reflect their culture. In the midst of knowledge explosion, relevant material must be selected which would prepare the learners to be functional. The school and community need to partnership closely so that the community has adequate information on curriculum content. They can function as a pressure group to point out areas of the curriculum that require change to make for relevance. Offorma (2005), has proposed a "curriculum for wealth creation" for Nigeria. This is a curriculum that teaches "entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and attitudes". These skills relate to problem solving, human relations, decision making, and effective communication. The individual will thus be equipped to be self-reliant. This is a major step in refocusing primary education and the school and community must work together to get the full attention of the government to do this.

Okam (2001), has opined that, one of the ways for making the educational system work is developing an effective relationship between the school and community in implementing the curriculum. There are laudable goals for primary education in the *National Policy on Education*. The problem is in implementation. The communities can liaise with the school to ensure that subjects such as science, mathematics, local language, trades and crafts are taught in the school rather than waiting for the government. Members of the community who are knowledgeable in such areas can volunteer their time to teach them or they can employ and pay specialists in such areas. After all, the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:17), states that, government welcomes contributions of voluntary agencies, communities and private individuals in the establishment and management of primary schools.

Rather than start their own schools, the community can make input into the existing public schools to ensure relevance and sustainable national development.

Teacher Training and Retraining

In the education business, the issue of trained teachers is relative to the level of education. A trained teacher in the primary school must possess a minimum of the National Certificate of Education (NCE). The community needs to monitor primary schools in their locality to ensure that they have trained teachers and encourage unqualified ones to go for training. They can help to organize workshops or sponsor teachers to conferences and other avenues of retraining. This way they can update their knowledge of content and pedagogy. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), has stated that, teaching method at this level should be practical, exploratory and experimental. Teachers need to be trained and retrained on how to use these methods.

Provision of Infrastructure/ Facilities

The government ought to provide the infrastructure and facilities required for running the schools. However, government has not been able to adequately provide these infrastructure/facilities for the schools. Therefore, effective school - community relations should be fostered to find alternative ways of providing much needed infrastructure/facilities. Well to do members of the community or community associations can carry out repair and refurbishment of infrastructure and facilities or provide new ones. They can also engage private sector assistance to this end. According to Pitroda (2006), local communities should take responsibility to mobilize added resources with public, private and NGO partnership to better equip and run the primary schools.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

This is a very important area because the world is currently driven by ICT. Recognizing the prominent role of ICT, the government decided that it should be integrated into primary education (FRN, 2004). Government was also to provide basic infrastructure and training needed. Apparently this has not been implemented.

The community should seek ways to mobilize funds to provide computer education in their primary schools. They can seek for donation of computers by private sector. Owners of computer business centres and cyber cafes in the area can be of great assistance in this area.

Recommendations

In refocusing primary education for relevance and sustainable national development, the following recommendations are made:

1. the school should foster a strong relationship with the community in which they operate,
2. the community should be fully involved in monitoring the schools to ensure relevance of curriculum and smooth running of the school,
3. wealthy members of the community should invest in the children, who are the future of the community,
4. companies operating in any area should make their presence felt by assisting the primary schools in the area, and
5. government should not abandon their duty of providing adequately for the schools owing to the involvement/assistance of the community.

Conclusion

Primary education is the very foundation of the educational system. It is the base on which the other levels of education are built and therefore should be adequately funded and provided for. However, the reverse has been the case creating the need to refocus primary education. This paper has examined how to refocus primary education through effective school - community relations. The school and community can partnership to refocus the curriculum, teacher training and retraining, provision of infrastructure/facilities, and introduction of ICT.

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