

# REPOSITIONING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA FOR THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Dr. Dare Michael Omotayo

## Abstract

In every nation of the world, primary education is considered as the first step towards a sound formal education. Primary education is indeed the backbone of all other system of education, because it is upon it that every other level of the educational system is built. On the basis of the above statement, the paper examines the concept of primary education, its objectives, problems and the vision of primary education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria.

## Introduction

Over the years, the management and administration of primary education in Nigeria had shifted from one tier of the government to the other creating serious educational and managerial problems. Apart from the falling standard of education now being witnessed in most of our primary schools, such incessant transfer of education responsibilities has had great effect on the attainment of the national objectives of primary education in Nigeria. Dare (1994)

Since the 1980's there has been inconsistency in the control and management of primary school in Nigeria. For example, in 1981, the control and management of primary education shifted to the states and local government council. Again in 1986, the federal government transferred (lie management of primary school to the federal government by decree 9 of 1986, In 1991 the federal government had another change of mind and enacted the local government education authority decree which not only increased the local government share of federal revenue from 15% to 20%, but also transferred the funding of primary schools to the third tier of government. And more recently, decree 10 of 1999 was enacted for the re-transfer of this sector of education to the federal government of Nigeria.

This rampant transfer of primary education from one tier of government to the other created more problems as each tier of government has its own method of management. The transfer confounded more problems than ever before. For instance not until recently, the annual allocations to primary school were being diverted to other sectors. This created a lot of problems ranging from primary school teachers' industrial actions, poor academic performance of pupils and lack of dedication by the primary school teachers. It is in the fight of the above exposition that the examination of the mission and vision of primary education in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century becomes inevitable.

## The Concept and Objective of Primary Education in Nigeria

Primary education, according to National Policy on Education (1998), is the education given in educational institutions for children aged 6 to 11 plus. Since the rest of the education system is built upon it, primary education is considered as the key to the success or the failure of the whole system. It has six-year duration.

## The Mission and the Goals of Primary Education in Nigeria

The goals of primary education in Nigeria as stated in National Policy on Education (1998) are as follows: 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 his changing environment;
  - (f) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limit of his capacity; and
- (g) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including for trades and crafts of the locality.

For effective realisation and actualisation of the above national objectives, the federal government of Nigeria, according to NUPE (1998), has focused on the following implementation strategy:

- a) Primary education shall be tuition free, universal and compulsory.
- b) The curriculum for primary education shall include languages, mathematics, sciences, physical and health education, religions, agriculture, home economics, social studies and citizenship education. Others are creative arts (drawing) handcraft, music, and cultural activities.
- c) The following educational services such as library, basic health scheme, counselling and educational response centres shall be provided for the attainment of the national objectives of primary education in Nigeria.

In spite of the bold steps and concerted efforts on the part of the Federal Government of Nigeria, the realization and the actualization of national education objectives, primary education in Nigeria is saddled with numerous national and societal problems.

### **The Problems of Primary Education in Nigeria**

The first national problem confronting effective attainment of primary education objectives, according to Adesina (1979), is inadequate funding. According to him, in most cases the substantial amount of money needed to pay teachers' salary, procure educational facilities, and to embark on capital project is not always available. In view of this problem, most of the primary school teachers are not more committed and dedicated to their profession. Inadequate funding has affected and is still affecting teachers' stability in the primary schools. It also explains mass movement of primary school teachers to greener pastures creating a vacuum for the infiltration of untrained teachers into the teaching profession.

Another problem militating against the attainment of the objectives of primary education is insufficient competent teachers. Specially trained and competent primary school teachers are not easy to come by. The few available ones, according to Taiwo (1986), tend to quit teaching profession due to poor motivation and unattractive conditions of service. The untimely exit of most of the professionally trained primary school teachers, he continues, is associated with the fact that most of these teachers want to be treated like their counterparts in other similar institutions.

Dare (1994) also identifies overcrowded classrooms as a major problem of primary education in Nigeria. According to him, in most primary schools in Nigeria, the teacher-student ratio has been found to be 1 to 100 or more. In an overcrowded classroom situation, individualized method of teaching is not practicable, contemporary continuous assessment programme becomes unattainable and effective classroom management which is an essential tool for a lofty academic achievement is usually defeated.

Another problem of primary education that merits discussion, according to Eric (1974), is the nature of the curriculum content. He states that the present curriculum content of primary education, as good as it is, does not address the emerging social changes such as the needs of the child, those of the community and the society at large. This vacuum, he says, is responsible for school dropouts and unemployment. As a matter of fact, a good curriculum content should be responsive to the immediate needs of the child and the society.

Closely related to the issue of a narrow curriculum content is also the problem of lack of dedication to the teaching profession by most of the primary school teachers. Ukeje (1995) remarks that lack of dedication can be associated with the poor conditions of service of the primary school teacher. According to him, most of the teachers involve in one economic activity or the other in order to supplement the monthly salary which is often considered insufficient to make ends meet.

### **Repositioning Primary Education to Meet the Needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Every nation in the world is now very conscious of the benefits of science and technology to the socio-economic and political development of any given society in all ramifications. For a country like Nigeria to be able to join the competitive race of technological advancement, the curriculum of primary education should be restructured to address itself to the emerging social changes, shrinking labour market and astronomical rise in the rate of dropout and unemployment. To be specific, the curriculum of primary education should include computer education, vocational training to equip the recipients of primary education for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Similarly, the curriculum of primary education in Nigeria should be restructured to relate to the needs of the child in his community and the world at large. This presupposes that the curriculum of primary education should be functional in order to be able to meet the needs of the child in the society at large in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the same vein, the assessment of primary education pupils for certification should measure knowledge, skills and competencies which are needed for a whole range of life expectancy and not only the subject matter knowledge which is only theoretically oriented. For primary education in Nigeria to be relevant to the needs and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, skill acquisition and competencies should be emphasized.

The conditions of service of the primary school teacher should be improved from time to time to enable teachers in the primary schools enjoy similar benefits like their counterparts in other institutions. Improved condition of service will, without any doubt, enhance the teachers' dedication and commitment to the teaching profession, which in turn will have a lasting positive effect on the pupils' academic achievement in the school. An improved condition of service will

also go a long way in curbing mass movement of trained personnel from the primary school to greener pastures.

Adequate funding of primary education in Nigeria is also very paramount to the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Considering the high demands for education in Nigeria, and its resultant effect on the need to improve and increase educational facilities^ adequate funding cannot be overemphasized. Adequate funding is necessary to pay teachers salary and other benefits promptly, to procure educational facilities and also for the execution of capital projects within the primary school system.

The problem of overcrowded classrooms as a result of high demands for education should be checked. It is a common practice in Nigeria, in most primary schools, to observe a swelling population of about one hundred pupils in a class. The greatest demerit of such ugly situation is that, the class teacher will be incapacitated in the use of individualized teaching method, which is appropriate for the level of education. Worse still, the teacher finds it difficult to give and assess pupils' class work and take home assignments promptly and efficiently.

In addition to the above, education is a capital-intensive programme and therefore, the financial obligation could be shared by other relevant agencies. For example, government should continue to encourage the participation of voluntary agencies, community and private individuals in the establishment, management and control of primary education in Nigeria. In order to meet the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the federal government must ensure that these agencies meet the minimum standard laid down by the government.

In conclusion, repositioning primary education for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires restructuring of the curriculum of primary school to address emerging social changes and the needs of the child, acquisition of computer and vocational skills. There is also a need for adequate funding, improved condition of service of teachers, curbing the problem of overcrowded classroom, and encouraging the contributions of private agencies in the participation of primary education in Nigeria provided they meet the laid down standards laid down by the federal government. Bold steps by the government in all the above areas will undoubtedly reposition primary education in Nigeria for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

- Adesina, S. (1981). *Planning and Education Development in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Board Publication Limited.
- Dare, M. (1994). *The Management of Schools for Effectiveness*. Kano: Kabo Press.
- Eric, C. (1974). *Education and Future Challenges*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Federal Government of Nigeria (1998). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Taiwo, C. (1983). *Nigerian Educational System*. He Ife: University of Ile Ife Press Ltd.
- Taiwo, C. O. (1980). *7776 Nigerian Education System, Past, Present and Future*. Lagos: Tomas Nelson Nigeria Ltd.
- Ukeje, B.O. (1995). Education of Teachers for a New Social Order. *Nigerian Teacher*. 7(1) 12.