

CHALLENGES OF NIGERIA PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Education is said or acknowledged to be the most powerful and indispensable instrument not only for economic and political advancement but also for progress in all human endeavours. In Nigeria, primary education lays the foundation upon which other levels are built. This paper therefore looks at the issues and insight in Nigeria primary education, its problem and solution for National Development.

Introduction

Knowledge is important and in the process of attaining it, the pupils gain such advantages as a retentive memory, a reasonable altitude to hard work and discipline and of course the elementary skills such as reading writing and numbering.

in the Nigerian education system, primary education is the education provided for children in school from the age of six to eleven or more years and it lasts for six years. With the new system of education in Nigeria which is referred to now as basic education, lasts for nine years as the starting point. This level lays the basic foundation upon which all other levels of education are built. This also means that the basic education holds the key to the success or failure of the whole education: system of any country.

After independence, the Nigerian educational system has been criticized for many reasons. Some Nigerians especially educationists, viewed the inherited colonial system of education as being irrelevant to the economic, political and socio-cultural needs of the country. The type of education being received then was said to be of foreign one to meet the needs of the foreign culture. It was as a result of these criticisms according to Safiya (2005), that a National curriculum conference was held in 1969, to review old and identify new national educational goals for Nigeria.

One of the recommendations of this conference proposed the 6-3-3-4 which was later adopted by the Government. In September, 6th 1976, a landmark in the history of education was made when General Olusegun Obasanjo (the then Military head of State) formally launched the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in Lagos. This programme can be regarded as a contribution to education because it benefited Nigerian in mobilizing her human resources, adjusting her educational imbalance and making provision for equal access to education for the Nigerian children. Apart from the above, history has revealed that the UPE programme was a failure for some reasons but mainly and basically for lack of fund and improper implementation especially in the Northern Nigeria.

General Objectives of Primary Education

Going by history of Nigeria education, evidence abounds that the National seminar on Educational Policy held in 1973, gave rise to the evolution of the National Policy on Education in 1977. There was also national workshop for the implementation committee which was revised in 1981. The main point of this policy was a considerable involvement of Federal Government in education as an instrument of national development and unity. In this regard, Taiwo (1980), states that, education in Nigeria is no more a private enterprise but huge government venture that has witnessed a progressive evolution of government's complete and dynamic intervention and active participation. The Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument per excellent for effecting national development.

Despite these interesting and impressive statements, the primary sector remains relatively unimpressive. The national policy on education (2004), states the general objectives of primary education as follows:

- t. The inculcation of permanent literacy and innumeracy and the ability to communicate effectively;
- ii. The laying of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;

- iii. Citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- iv. Character and moral training and the development of sound attitudes;
- v. Developing in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment;
- vi. Giving the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limit of his capacity; and. vii. Providing basic tools for further education advancement including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

These objectives can be said to form the basis for the provision of primary education in Nigeria. If one looks at these objectives, they aimed at complete development of the Nigerian child through basic education, which is necessary for national advancement.

The Curricular

To achieve the above stated objectives of primary school education in Nigeria, the following curricular activities were prescribed by the Government:

- i. Primary Science to meet the needs of the changing society based on scientific and technological advancements;
- ii. Social Studies to inculcate in children the norms and values of the local community and the society at large; In this regard, basic education is essential in reconciliation of the socio-cultural diversities, which exist because of the multi-cultural nature of Nigeria. This goes a long way in promoting national consciousness, unity and advancement.
- iii. Moral and religious instruction for character and moral development of children. The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes in children through basic education is necessary for solving most of the national problems, such as tribalism, religious intolerance, selfishness, greediness, that have bedeviled Nigeria for several years.
- iv. Local crafts, domestic science and agric science to encourage social and economic developments early in children. This can also serve as basis for achieving national self reliance especially in food production and raw materials.
- v. Health and physical education for personal hygiene and good health. To implement these curricular activities effectively, Government intends to provide junior libraries for primary school children, materials and manpower for teaching science, encouraging inter-state visit and school excursions, ensure that school authorities maintain a high degree of sanitation in the school environment, facilities for the teaching of creative arts and craft and provide farm implements and seeds.

Language of Communication

The National Policy on Education states that Government will ensure that the method of instruction in primary schools de-emphasize the memorization and regurgitation of facts, instead, it will encourage practical and experimental methods and in particular that the development of manual skills is stressed and encouraged by re-orienting the present system of teacher education towards this objectives. In order to achieve this, Government has also prescribed that the medium of instruction in the primary school should initially be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment for English would be used at a later stage of the primary school. The presenter of this paper is of contrast view of Fafunwa (1974), regarding the Government view of language of instruction which states that "it is still debatable point as to whether the Nigerian or African child should not receive his first six to twelve years of education in his mother tongue, which is the way all European, American and Japanese children learn and therefore learn better".

The Nigeria of today has changed in terms of language communication at primary school level. You can observe in some rural areas the mother tongue, is being used as means of instruction throughout the primary school years whereas in other places a combination of mother tongue and English arc used as means of instruction.

The Quality of Teachers

The role of teachers in curriculum implementation is very essential because they translate educational policies and programmes into action. In this wise, the Government states in the National Policy on education that all teachers in the educational system from preprimary to tertiary level will be professionally trained. Teacher education programme therefore will be structured to equip teachers for effective performance 'of their duties. In addition to this, NCE will also be the minimum entry requirement into the profession. How effective, will this be implemented? The Government has also slated that it will increase the supply of specialist teachers in subjects such as science, physical education and languages by providing adequate facilities in the teacher training Colleges. Also, as primary education is the basis of the educational development, efforts will be made to achieve and maintain both in quantity and quality of teaching staff in existing institutions. If one observes carefully, one can see that the courses being offered at the NCE level, in Colleges of education from NCE's one to three cover all areas of human endeavour that can make or lead the trained personnel to impact to the younger ones what is required to build a virile nation.

The Problems

From the colonial era to the period Nigeria gained her independence, primary education has been affected by various changes in events. Today, more than forty five years after independence, primary education is being confronted with many problems, such as:

1. Expansion of Primary Education: Since the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in 1976, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of primary schools with a corresponding increase in population of pupils' enrolment. This increase has brought about a decrease in the number of qualified teachers, and to meet up with the population demand, many candidates are today being admitted into Colleges of education and universities with faculties of education to be trained as teachers. Again, inherent problems associated with teacher training institution such as inadequate teaching practice supervision and large number of admission of students do not allow for the production of qualified teachers. The UPE programme, according to Safiya (2005), was one of the educational developments which brought about a population explosion in schools in terms of quantity. Apart from this, the population explosion has also affected the quality of education in primary schools; this is because the success of education is best measured from the quality or effectiveness of the education acquired. In support of this view, Shika (1999), says: the success of education could not be based purely on the number of pupils enrolled or turned out by the system, from every indication, pupils enrolled in the UPE did not receive the education declared for them.

2. Inadequate Provision of Infrastructural Facilities: One of the outstanding problems of primary education in Nigeria is inadequate provision of infrastructural facilities such as school building, classroom, library, sporting facilities and equipment. These are very, important for effective teaching and learning. The Government, being the overseer is aware of these as slated in the national policy on education that "Government will ensure that all primary schools are properly equipped to promote sound and effective teaching, and in particular that suitable textbooks and libraries are provided for schools. To this end, funds are being provided for school libraries, textbooks and equipment. However, a visit to most public primary schools reveals or shows the opposite of these Government statements most school buildings are dilapidated, bad shape, broken windows and doors, pot-holes on the floor. No chairs for teachers, no libraries, no running taps and toilet facilities. As a result of all these, most schools are often littered with dirt, urine and faces and after school hours these buildings become hide-out for criminals where they use for smoking prohibited drugs and cigarette such conditions are not good or conducive for any meaningful learn Safiya (2005).

3. Establishment of Private Primary Schools: This is one of the problems of the basic education. Due to inadequate supervision by inspectorate division of the ministry of education as well as poor management financially and lack of full commitment to the education sector by Government, many people have resorted to establish private school all over the country. Some of these private schools are illegal; they are established because their owners connive with some staff of the ministry to get permission to establish school. Unknowingly, some of these schools cause a lot of damage to the Government or public schools. Unfortunately, the government officials who are supposed to encourage the government schools, have their children in these private schools because they believe the private schools are well equipped and have better staff. In support of this notion, Aguokogbuo

(2001), states that in Lagos state alone as reported by ministry of-education officials, estimated that there are two hundred and fifty (250) illegal nursery and primary schools and that because the proprietors of such schools had no money to hire qualified teachers, they employed the services of unprofessional teachers.

4. **Political Constraint:** Another likely problem for the primary education is political instability. When the UPE was established in 1976, Nigerians welcome the idea, but the programme was short lived because it was abandoned immediately there was change of government.

Girl-Child Education

UNESCO (1995) observed that more than one hundred billion children worldwide had not access to primary education out of which sixty million were girls. Despite the general growth of enrolment in primary school after the launching of the UPE the enrolment rate for girls especially in the Muslim predominated areas of Nigeria is still low, this is because allowing girls to enroll in school at the age of puberty violates the traditional norms and ethics of the society in the Muslim territories and this discourages many parents from sending their daughters to school. This could therefore disagree with the legislation that makes education compulsory for all children.

5. **Socio-Cultural Constraint**

There is no doubt that modernization has destroyed individualism and rurality, resistant to change and religion finalism. But there are still some parents who do not want to send their children or wards to go to school because they are yet to realize the value of education, and at the same time they want these children to support them in their daily economic activities. Also some parents don't want to send their children to some particular school because such schools belong to religious bodies other than their own.

The Issue

With the new development in education sector now, the questions many Nigerians will want answers to include;

- i. What is the fate of a primary school leaver who does not-want to continue his education. Does this imply that there is no more common entrance examination into secondary schools/
- ii. What is the position of the existing junior secondary schools?
- iii. What is the position of Federal Government Colleges in the country?

All these and many others relating to primary/basic education in Nigeria are issues which need clarification to the general public especially those in the rural areas.

The Way Forward

1. In as much as the presenter is very much interested with this development in education, it is his candid opinion that as a matter of urgency the syllabus should be restructured to reflect the aims' and objectives of the new system.
2. The federal Government should provide a policy guideline both at Federal and state that should restrict the proliferation of private schools in the country.
3. Teachers should be encouraged to stay on the job i.e. teachers should be more recognized like medical doctors, lawyers, engineers. In this wise not every Dick and Harry goes to the class to teach.
4. There should be proper and adequate monitoring and supervision of schools.
5. The rural populace should be informed and educated on the new system of education otherwise majority of the parents may not allow their children to go to school rather they want them to be farmers or traders.

Conclusion

Everywhere in the World, education (formal or informal) is a legacy any country or nation will want to be proud of. If this is so, the right education at the right time needs to be provided. Basic education in Nigeria is in the right direction and should be pursued to the latter because it is designed to give a complete development of the child (if going by the aims and objectives).

In the past, these objectives have been frustrated by many unforeseen problems. Some of these problems have been offered solutions to, in this paper which I believe if followed there will be changes and a way forward in the primary education in Nigeria thereby laying a good and concrete foundation for better Nigeria.

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