

PRIMARY EDUCATION CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to highlight some of the challenges on primary education in the 21st century. The conceptual and empirical overview of primary education is to educate the learners to meet their needs, since primary education is surely the foundation on which secondary and tertiary education are built, if the foundation is fragile, the superstructure will fall. Attaining and sustaining qualitative education at this level has always been the yearning of policy formulators, curriculum experts, teachers, parents, and pupils as well. However, effort at satisfying this yearning have continued to be daunted by many problems. There is need to address these problems in order to move our educational system forward.

Introduction

The term education has been defined differently by many authors throughout the world. However, the understanding of the past few hundred years. Before the era of formal schooling education was regarded as any process of bringing up or rearing children in a given society. It was an important instrument for transmitting the accumulated knowledge and culture from generation to generation and for developing human traits that contribute to economic output, social stability and the production of new knowledge, such system of education was termed traditional or informal education. Prior to the introduction of western education, Nigerian societies were noted for their rich cultural and traditional values, which preserved and transmitted to their members from generation to generation through a system of traditional education.

Education recently has been considered as a vehicle for social changes and a powerful tool for social, economic, political and technological development of any country. Education is also viewed as a life-long process that is not limited to formal schooling instruction but it involves all life experiences. In essence, it is a process by which individuals within a particular community improve their well-beings and their community. According to Peters (1967), education is the all round development of a person physically, intellectually, morally and spiritually. This implies that education encourages a wholesome development of the individual through participation in the activities of social group. It therefore follows that such education must take into consideration the active involvement of the person to be developed.

At this juncture, it is necessary to differentiate between primary school and education. Primary school is a social organization as well as an educational institution where children receive instruction in the "basics" or rudimentary knowledge in every school subject. According to the National Policy on Education (1981) Primary Education is given in an institution to children from age 6 to 11+ primary education, therefore, involves learning and being instructed in the basic fundamental concepts, skills principles and knowledge etc. Government's direct involvement in education provision begins from this level because of the whole system of education.

The Nigerian Primary Education Policy

The 1977/81 policies on primary education are expressed in seven general objectives:

- i. 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, moral training and the development of sound attitudes.
- v. Development 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 limits of his capacity.
- vii. Providing basic tools for further education advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

The first major step taken by Government towards the realization of the declared objectives was the introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme in 1976. From that year primary education in Nigeria was supposed to be free and accessible to all children in all parts of the country.

The curricular activities are broad-based. They include the following;

- The inculcation of literacy and numeracy.
- The study of science,
- Civics and social studies.
- Health and physical education
- Moral and religious instruction
- Creative activities
- Music
- Domestic science
- Agriculture.

The policy further specifies instructional resources, infrastructural facilities manpower and conditions that Government will provide for the implementation of curriculum activities. These are as follows:

Establishment of junior libraries, materials and personnel for the teaching of sciences, facilities and teachers for local craft and domestic science. Supply of suitable textbooks and instructional materials, provision of counseling services, specialist teachers in physical education, language arts music and fine art.

1: 40 teacher-pupil ratio accepted for the transition period while 1:30 teacher - pupil ratio is to the target for the future: (i) the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early stages and English in the later stages, (ii) Encouragement of practical, exploratory and experimental method, (iii) Introduction of guidance- oriented continuous assessment system, (iv) Provision of adequate educational services such as health programme, counseling, Audio-Visual aids, etc. (v) Provision of specialists for particular subjects like science, physical education and languages arts, (vi) Correcting the imbalance between different sections of the country in terms of availability of educational facilities and the number of girls receiving formal education versus boy. (vii) Discourage the incidence of drop out at the primary school level of education, (viii) Encourage private individuals, communities and voluntary agencies to establish and manage standard primary schools alongside those provided by Government.

Implementation of the Policy

The policy for Nigerian primary education is sound in conception and expression. It is reasonably comprehensive enough to satisfy all aspirations for qualitative education at this level.

However, the translation of the policy intentions into quantifiable qualitative actions and result has not measured up to expectation. The mismatch in the policy intentions and implementation is very obvious in all sections of the policy.

The UPE scheme started with great fan fare but died soon after it took off because of several complex problems that confronted its implementations. We shall briefly highlight some of these problems.

Planning

While the policy was well conceived as mentioned earlier, its implementation lacked proper planning. A project of that magnitude requires adequate and careful planning that is informed by accurate statistics. As a result of the unplanned implementation, government was ill prepared to meet the needs of the scheme in terms of provision of adequate human and material resources.

Shortage of Trained Teachers

As soon as the UPE scheme was introduced, there was a report of tremendous upsurge in enrolment all over the country. The enrolment became too large for the few trained teachers that were hired in large number into the schools. In addition, crash programme for training teachers for primary schools were introduced through these programmes, most of them were ill prepared and incapable of implementing the primary school curriculum effectively, in other words, majority of the teachers are

unable to interpret the curriculum, plan and manage the learning situation in the proper way that could ensure satisfactory attainment of the intended objectives.

Instructional Materials

Basic course books for teacher, pupils and audio-visual and were lacking in schools. Most people send their children to school on the expectations that government would provide textbooks and instructional materials as declared in the policy. Government was unable to meet this expectation basically because of inadequate planning and poor logistics. Teaching and learning were done in bare classrooms devoid of basic learning materials. The teaching methods employed by teachers were inevitably those that promote memorization and regurgitation of facts. Learning by pupils was tedious, boring and inefficient.

Facilities

Basic school facilities such as classrooms, libraries and playground were critically in short supply. Classrooms were over-crowded and critically inadequate such that many classes were held under trees and in open grounds, Since no proper teaching could be done in these unorthodox makeshift classrooms, pupils learning in quantity and quality were intangible and poor.

Poor Management

The schools were being managed by personnel who lacked the experience and expertise necessary for managing schools particularly at this period of explosion in enrolment coupled with acute scarcity of instructional resources. Indiscipline among pupils and teachers as well was rampant. Lateness to school, and truancy became the order of the day. All of these contributed to the failure of the UPE scheme and low level of training attainment.

Funding

Soon after the take off of the UPE scheme, the funding became a burden which government could no longer bare. This situation was further compounded by mismanagement of available meager fund. Budgetary allocation and implementation were done without taking into cognizance the priorities of the schools. As funding dwindled, government- could no longer actualize its policy intentions for primary education. Most of the provisions promised to be made available such as the establishment of libraries, and supply of textbooks could longer be provided because of lack of fund. All of the above problems led to haphazard implementation of the policy and consequently, poor standard of achievement.

The policy on education was revised in 1981 but the-transformation of its intentions into actual practice seems yet unappreciably realized in primary schools. What then do we do with the present policy? The discussions so far have shown that the problem is not with the policy per say, rather it lies mainly in implementation. This means that adequate drastic steps need to be taken to address these fundamental problems militating against effective implementation of the policy, some of which we have highlighted here. Provision of adequate funding is very crucial to successful implementation. Government must adopt effective strategy of providing and managing funds adequately for the implementation of the primary education system.

Conclusively good planning is inevitable. This must be based on accurate statistics so that adequate human and material resources needed will be properly determined, supplied and maintained. Other sources of funding must be sought to complement government's funding. Parents and the communities' contributions in this regard should be encouraged and clearly defined. Company tax and levies are also other sources of complementing government's funding. The modalities for collecting the tax and levies from these sources should be clearly marked out and implemented.

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