The Dilemma of Education in Africa: An Overview of Curriculum Programmes of Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

Education in Nigeria is said and seen to be an instrument “par excellence” for affecting national development. Education seeks to inculcate social norms and mores in the young. It seeks to prepare each person for his or her future role in society. Education transforms by inculcating the skills needed for survival in the immediate environment and mobilizes all available human energies and talents for holistic individual and societal development. Education indeed is an instrument of solution to African problems, be it economic, health, finance, social, political and moral. When its importance is looked into holistically by the government, it will go a long way in tackling the numerous challenges that have bedeviled the continent. Thus, this paper gives a definition of curriculum. It looks into the Nigerian school curriculum during the colonial era as well as the curriculum during the post colonial era. It looks into the reforms so far carried out in the school curriculum. The equally discusses on the factors necessitating for curriculum change. It also explains some challenges of having a responsive curriculum. It concludes with suggestions on how to achieve functional curriculum in Nigeria.

The inadequacies of the inherited colonial system (i.e. lack of universal access, inappropriate orientation and content, inappropriate skills for national-building) were extensively analyzed in 1961 by African States at the First Conference of Ministries of Education, organized by UNESCO in Addis Ababa. Popular political movements which waged very protracted wars for independence as was seen in some African
countries went to the extent of evolving consistent, new philosophies of education and experimented on alternative models during their periods of struggle.

Evidence shows that the first two decades of independence witnessed some concerted efforts to evolve genuine national system of education. At the level of policy, national consultations were held and national policy documents for example, the (Nyerere’s famous education for self-reliance) as cited by Obanya (2004) were produced. Schools were opened up to wider section of the populace and access improved here in Nigeria. Schools of all categories increased in numbers in response to increased social demands and there was a schooling boom in African countries during the period.

UNESCO, along with other development partners, responded to the demands of African member states for “more and better education.” School building projects were launched in the 1970s. Curriculum development and science equipment centres were established in Nigeria and some other African countries as in Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe etc. institutions for teacher training and technical/vocational education were developed. Innovations blossomed in the form of experiments on:

a. The use of national languages in education.
ii. educational radio and television.
iii. low cost materials and method for teaching and learning of science
i. In-service teacher education, etc.

The literary campaigns pioneered by UNESCO in the 1960s with the launching of the experimented world literacy programmed also helped to boost the development of education in Nigeria and African countries were able to reduce illiteracy considerably. Non-formal education became recognized as complementary to schooling and structures were created to boost that sub-sector.

The regional programme envisaged a two-pronged approach to the elimination of illiteracy, intensification of literacy programmes and the expansion/improvement of primary education. In its regional cooperation components, the programme as explained by Obanya (2004) focused:

a. The development of national plans and strategies
b. Training and retraining of literacy personnel,
c. Studies and action research,
d. Exchange of information and personnel,
e. Development of didactic materials
f. Sensitization and mobilization of public opinion,
Though education in Nigeria and other Africa countries still faced a great number of problems, gains (especially in the quantitative dimension) were made in early years of independence. The gains however were not capitalized upon because of the numerous problems ranging from lack of relevance, poor resource allocation and a general apathy towards schooling, a phenomenon now known as ‘decolonization’ according to Obanya (2004). This phenomenon therefore raises the question of the relevance of education in its various dimensions on the cultural, philosophical and pedagogical dimensions. Young persons are querying the practical utility of school work. In Nigeria and some other African countries, boys now opt out of school to seek (and often obtain) genuine education in the world or work. The economic dimension relating to the increasing unemployables of school leavers, both as a result of the schools not inculcating useable or marketable skills and in terms of lack of absorptive capacity in the national economy.

Obviously, the explanation for this state of affairs is that education in Africa, Nigeria in particular, has been the number one victim of the political and economic sufferings that have afflicted the region in the last two decades, hence the need to review the Nigerian schools curricula.

What is Curriculum?

Curriculum is an educational instrument through which the school transforms the learner and the society. The success or failure of any educational system depends to a large extent on the successful planning and execution of the instrument called ‘curriculum’. Gbamanja (1997) explained that the wealth or poverty of a nation depends squarely on the content of the curriculum. This is because it is primarily through the school curriculum that the values, the dreams and the desires of a nation are better interpreted. He therefore defined curriculum to consist of a carefully mapped out programme consisting of what to teach and experiences given to the learners under the auspices of the school and they are given or acquired through three major curriculum categories namely:

i. programme of studies, comprising all subjects taught and learnt in schools.
ii. programmes of activities, activities meant to enhance academic activities.
iii. programmes of guidance meant to direct learners on their choice of subjects and moral conduct.

Mkpa (1987) viewed curriculum as a vehicle through which the school strives towards achievement of educational ends, be they those of the nation, state, local governments or even the community.
Curriculum is defined by Offorma (2005) as a vehicle through which education is attained, since the essence of education is the ability to transfer the knowledge, facts, skills, values and attitudes learnt in one situation to solve problems in another situation and this is done through curriculum. It is the totality of the environment in which education takes place. It involves the learner, the teacher, the content, the subject, the resources, the methods of teaching, the evaluation as well as the physical and psychological environment which must be adequate and conducive for learning to take place.

Nigerian Education School Curriculum during the Colonial Era

The aims of the Christian Missionary Education in Africa was mainly the conversion of Africans to Christianity, that is to enable the prospective converts to read the Bible, understand the gospel message, spread it to others and win their souls. These were to be achieved through education. According to Fafunwa (1974:81), knowledge of the Bible, the ability to sing hymns and recite catechism, as well as the ability to communicate both orally and in writing, were considered essential for a good Christian.

In pursuance of the afore-stated objectives, the content of the missionary school curriculum consisted mainly of the four Rs – reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. Pupils were engaged in such activities as reading, recitation of the catechism, singing (of hymns), prayers, sewing and knitting (for girls) and farming (for boys). English composition, English grammar, arithmetic, geography, writing, dictation. The medium of instruction in the schools located in the Western part of the country was Yoruba in addition to the literary and religious content, vocational training was pursued, the curriculum objectives of the missionary schools were geared towards meeting the needs of the missionaries, which were at variance with those of the Nigerians.

Because the colonial system operated the ‘grammar’ school curriculum which trained students only in literary subjects, they only produced white-collar workers. The students during the colonial era were tested only on the cognitive domain (by one terminal or external examination). The needs and aspirations of Nigerians were not met through such alien curriculum that was found to be dysfunctional.

Nigerian School Curriculum During Post Independence Era

During the first decade of the post independence era in Nigeria, calls were intensified from various quarters for the reform of the educational system, more importantly, the school curriculum. During this era, there was dire need to make education more relevant to the needs of the nation. A major landmark in the history of education in Nigeria was the national curriculum conference held in Lagos in September 1969. This was in response to the calls for reforms. A wide spectrum of opinions were expressed by people from all walks of life all over the country in a bid to
identify goals of education in Nigeria, taking cognizance of the needs of the learners and those of the Nigerian society.

The conference made far-reaching recommendations which formed the subject matter of subsequent seminars and workshop organized at the instance of the Federal Government. One of such seminars of distinguished experts was held in 1973 and its recommendations, after passing through the various organs of government, culminated in the publication in 1977 of the National Policy on Education and the concomitant adoption of the 6-3-3-4 system of education.

Source: (Oteh and Akuma 2010: 54-55).

The Reforms / Innovations so far in the Nigerian School Curriculum

Various curriculum reforms/innovation efforts have been made so far in Nigeria school system some of such reforms / innovations are: the 6-3-3-4 structure of the educational system as stated in NPE (2004)

a. Primary education shall be tuition free, universal and compulsory.
b. Curriculum for primary education shall include
   
   **Languages**
   
   (i) Language of the environment (ii) English (iii) French (iv) Arabic

**Mathematics**

(i) Science (ii) Physical and Health Education (iii) Religious knowledge (iv) Agriculture /Home Economics (v) Social Studies and citizenship education (vi) Cultural and creative arts (Drawing, handcraft), (vii) Computer education

c. The following educational services shall be provided
   
   (i) School library (ii) basic health scheme (iii) Counseling (iv) educational resource centre (v) specialist teachers of particular subjects such as mathematics, science, physical education, language arts (in relation to English, French, sign language and Nigerian languages), Library, music, fine art and home economics.
d. Teaching shall be by practical, exploratory and experimental methods

e. The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.
f. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.
g. For effective teaching and learning, the pupil ratio shall be 1:35

h. Advancement from one class to another shall be based on continuous assessment.
Junior Secondary School

a. The Junior secondary school shall be both pre-vocational and academic. It shall be tuition free, universal and compulsory. It shall teach basic subject which will enable pupils to acquire further knowledge and skills. Every student shall offer:
   i. A minimum of 10 and a maximum of 13 subjects.
   ii. All subjects in group A
   iii. At least one subject each from group B and group C.

Group A: Core
   i. English – Mathematics – French
   ii. Language of environment to be taught as L1 one major Nigerian language other than that of the environment to be taught as L2
   iii. Integrated science – social studies and citizenship education
   iv. Introductory Technology

Group B: Prevocational Elective
   i. Agriculture – Business Studies – Home Economics – Local Crafts – Computer education – Fine arts and music

Group C: Non-prevocational Elective
   i. Religious knowledge – physical and health education and Arabic

Students who complete Junior Secondary school shall be streamed into
   i. The senior secondary school
   ii. The technical college
   iii. An out-of-school vocational training centre
   iv. Am apprenticeship scheme

Senior Secondary School

a. The senior secondary school shall be comprehensive with a core curriculum designed to broaden pupils’ knowledge and out-look.
   b. Every student shall take the six (6) core-subjects in group A and a minimum of one and a maximum of two (2) from the list of elective subjects in group B and C to give a minimum of seven (7) and a maximum of eight (8) subjects.

Group A Core
   English language, mathematics, a major Nigerian language, one of literature in-English, History, Geography or religious studies and a vocational subject.

Group B. Vocational Elective
   i. Agriculture
   ii. Applied Electricity
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iii. Auto-mechanic
iv. Book-keeping and Accounting
v. Building construction
vi. Computer education
vii. Electronics
viii. Clothing and Textiles
ix. Food and nutrition
x. Home management
xi. Metal work
xii. Technical work
xiii. Wood work
xiv. Short hand
xv. Type writing
xvi. Fine art
xvii. Music

Group c. Vocational Elective
i. Biology
ii. Further mathematics
iii. Health education and physical education
iv. History
v. Bible knowledge
vi. Government
vii. Any Nigerian language that has orthography and literature
viii. Chemistry
ix. French
x. Literature in English
xi. Geography
xii. Islamic studies
xiii. Arabic

Certification
i. The junior school certificate (JSC) shall be based on continuous assessment and examination conducted by state and Federal Examination Boards.
ii. The senior school certificate (SSC) shall be based on continuous assessment and national examination. Transition from secondary education to tertiary education shall be through the appropriate selection mechanism: (NPE 2004: 15 – 23)

In response to global reforms in education and the actualization of vision 2015 in 1999, the 6-3-3-4 system was further reformed and it metamorphosed into UBE (Universal
basic Education). The new curriculum content for the nine-year basic education as explained by Obioma (2007) emphasizes functionality with ICT, infusion of entrepreneurial skills using the relevant subject content as drivers, infusion of such emerging issues as HIV/AIDS education, anti corruption studies, capital market studies.

a. Scapping of the central common entrance (placement) examination for primary six pupils into JSS1.
b. Scrapping and abolition of terminal examination for primary six pupils.
c. Basic education certificate examination (BECE) at the end of the nine year examination.
d. Introduction of selective (placement) examination for graduating JSS students who are potentially bound for senior secondary (post basic) education.
e. Adopted assessment policy is that pupils who successfully completed primary six now proceed straight to JSS1 without a selective (placement) examination, based on three term weighted score for cognitive and psychomotor domains.

The nine-year basic education curriculum is divided into three levels:

a. Lower Basic Education, Primary (1-3)
b. Middle Basic Education, (Primary 4-6)
c. Upper Basic Education (JSS1-3)

The subjects and contents flow systematically from primary 1 – JSS3, thus they form building blocks for the learning of future contents as illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Core compulsory subjects</th>
<th>Electives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Lower Basic (Grade 1 – 3 ) | 1. English Studies  
2. A major Nigeria language  
3. Mathematics  
4. Basic Science & technology  
5. Social Studies  
6. Civil Education  
7. Cultural and Creative Arts | 1. Agriculture  
2. Home Economics  
3. Arabic Language |
| Middle Basic (Grade 4 – 6) | 1. English Studies  
2. A major Nigerian language  
3. Mathematics  
4. Basic Studies  
5. Social Studies  
6. Civil Education  
7. Cultural and Creative Arts  
8. Religious Studies  
9. Physical & Health Education  
10. French | 1. Agriculture  
2. Home Economic  
3. Arabic Language  
Pupils must offer 1 elective, but not more than 2 |

World Educators Forum
Factors Necessitating for Further Curriculum Reforms

Despite the curriculum innovation and reforms so far carried out in Nigeria schools, there are still need for further reforms, such reasons include:

1. **Change in the Modern World (Digital Revolution and Globalization)**
   As a result of the rapid change in the world of work today, the current electronic/computer technology is introducing overwhelming increase in knowledge in our society. Thus, it is inconceivable that consumers could utilize the products of modern technology fully without the requisite education needed to understand the technology. In this age of globalization, teachers are expected to dispense knowledge through counselling, consulting and guiding the learner achieve the stated objectives. Globalization as explained by Obioma (2010) is the factor driving the changes and the removal of obstacles to world trade and movement of human capital drives globalization. According to him, globalization has brought to the fore the fundamental significance of global competitiveness in recent times as nations strive to meet their local needs on a global benchmark as well as meet the demand of competition in a global scale. Thus the importance of human capacity in all of these is the issue of education and skills development that will usher in economic growth and social emancipation (Obioma 2008: 8).

2. **Need to Relate in-school Education to out-of-school Realities**
   Gbamanja (1997) agreed to the fact that the primary reason why many school leavers today remain unemployable or underemployed is that what they learn in school, in many cases does not relate to life outside school or in industry. Many times, the learner is required to define or learn about certain information, but not necessarily understanding the concepts of what is learnt. The inability to transfer learning is not uncommon. The content of any curriculum must

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upper Basic (grades 7 – 9)</th>
<th>1. English Studies</th>
<th>1. Agriculture</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Mathematics</td>
<td>3. Arabic Language</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Basic Studies</td>
<td>4. Business Studies</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Social Studies</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Civil Education</td>
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<td>7. Cultural &amp; Creative Arts</td>
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<td>8. Religious Studies</td>
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<td>9. Physical &amp; Health Education</td>
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<td>10. French Language</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. Basic Technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12. Computer Studies</td>
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</tbody>
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Pupils must offer 2, but not more 3 electives.

Source: (Obanya 2009: 155 – 156)
consider and integrate the numerous economic, social and political problems that have bedeviled the African nations.

3. **Challenges of having a Responsive Curriculum in Nigerian Schools**
   Education is seen as an instrument for transforming individuals, solving societal problems be it economic, social or political problems. Kayoed (2010) lamented that of all the multifarious problems bedevilling the nation Nigeria today, that of the education sector is the most serious and urgent. All other problems have in one way or the other their root causes traceable to the problems of the education sector. Obanya (2004) explained that although some innovation and reforms have been introduced into the education sector, yet the positive impact has not been that evident, as testified by the following well-known factors the nation’s education paradox.
   a. The gap between educational intentions and realization is still wide.
   b. More money is said to be voted for education, but the sector is still severely under-funded.
   c. There are more children in school, but coverage is still inadequate and uneven, while efficiency and quality have not shown any encouraging signs.

4. **Overload Subject Matter Especially at the Primary Education Level (PEL) and the Junior Secondary Education Level (JSEL)**
   Obioma (2010) agreed that the number of subjects offered both at the primary school level even before the development of the new 9 year basic education curriculum was much, it was as much as 17 – 20, even with the BEC the number of compulsory subjects ranges from 11-14. The over subscription of subject matter at the primary and junior secondary education levels do not permit the establishment of the inter relatedness of the acquisition of education. The consequences is that students are often ill-prepared for higher knowledge with its negative implications for the development of the foundation for globally competitive human capital capable of meeting local needs as well as best practice in the global space.

5. **Obsolete / Narrow Scope of school Curricula**
   It has been observed in Nigeria schools today that what the students learn in schools in many cases do not relate to life outside school or industry. The university and polytechnic curricula for essentially all the programmes have remained stagnant. The current programme offering in universities and polytechnics do not prepare the graduates for the world of work and industry. Since majority of the graduates lack skills that meet modern job challenges, most of them have remained unemployable. Alkali (2008) lamented that some
of the university graduates are seen roaming about in the streets with no jobs after two or three years of graduating, such anomalies in the development strategies is a serious challenge which must be fought. This is an indication that our educational curriculum at all level is shallow or our educational contents are extremely narrow and restrictive in outlook with curriculum.

6. **Obsolete Subject Matter at the Senior Secondary Education Level (SSEL)**
   The extant subject matter in general is much skewed towards academic. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) offerings which are meant to prepare students for their functional world of work and in the process lay the foundation for technological development and entrepreneurship, are ignored and relegated to the background. Thus, the products from the present curriculum structure have no lifelong survival skills at all.

7. There is a disjoint between related subject matter of primary education level (PEL) and junior secondary education level (JSEL). For instance, primary school learners study primary science but have no foundation in technology at all. Thus, on getting to the JSEL, learners are ill-prepared in introductory technology and integrated science. Obioma (2010) is of the opinion that this may have led to subsequent failure in the sciences and technology related areas.

8. No elementary foundation of ICT related subject matter especially at the pre-tertiary education level of public schools. As explained by Obanya (2004), the world is driven by knowledge economy. The rudiments for the establishment of knowledge economy is through the systematic teaching of such knowledge technologies as ICT.

**Poor Curricula Implementation**

It is very obvious that no matter how well curriculum is developed, its effectiveness lies on proper implementation at the classroom level

**Conclusion**

For Africa to get out its educational dilemma in the 21st century, structural adjustment in the education sector shall be a reflection of adjustment in the wider society. The stress should be on doing things right. Involving the people, mobilizing and channeling resources to where they are mostly needed, and having in mind the long term benefits of education to society. There should be large scale public policy debates on education. Studies have been carried out, numerous action plans have been carried out, but all these will have to be revisited, with a view to integrating them into a unified whole and realigning their goals and targets with contemporary and future needs. When
this is done, it can then be said that Nigerian educational curriculum programme is responsive enough to be called an instrument for developing human potential.

**Recommendations**

To achieve the educational reform policies of the Nigeria government, the following suggestions should be adhere to:

1. The gap between educational intentions and their realization should be closed. This should be achieved through restructuring of the school curriculum at all levels.
   a. These should be reduction of the content standards of BEC from 21 distinct subject listing to about subject clusters: English studies, mathematics, basic science and cultural arts. The senior secondary school curriculum should also be restructured.
   b. There is need for elementary foundation for ICT related subject matter especially at the pre-tertiary education level in public or government owned schools.
   c. The curriculum of universities should as well be restructured to produce graduates with globally competitive skills.

2. Enforce Targeted and Sustainable Funding of Education: No meaningful reform / innovation in any country can be achieved without adequate funds. More resource (increased funding) for education, targeting priority/ high impact projects that match budgetary targets is recommended.

**References**


