

PRIMARY EDUCATION AND NATION BUILDING ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Primary education is very important to the life of any nation. It holds the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system. Therefore, it is very critical in a developing country like Nigeria. Hence, this paper critically assessed the objectives and curricular provisions as well as the problems militating against the achievement of the objectives of primary education in Nigeria. Suggestions and recommendations were made. These include the re-establishment of Grade Two Teachers' training institutions, one teacher should not teach all the primary school subjects, issuance of policy guidelines to be followed by all who wish to establish primary schools, insulating control and management of primary education from the corrupt politicians, adequate remuneration of teachers by government etc.

Introduction

According to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981), primary education is education given in an institution for children between the ages of 6 to 11+. This age of primary schooling is very crucial in the life of any child. It is worthy of note that within the first few years of life, a child is subjected to a dizzying influx of learning. For example, concept formation, acquisition of basic skills of learning in letters and Figures starts early in the life of any child. Thus, at the secondary and tertiary level of education, learning becomes a matter of association of these concepts, and basic skills. This is why the NPE perceives primary education as the foundation on which other levels of education are built and so it becomes the key to the success or failure of the whole system. Hence, Nwagwu (1978) opined that the primary school age is the most formative and impressionable age. Thus, children's intellectual growth and development will depend upon the foundations provided by the experiences in the primary schools. Thus, there is absolute need to give children good foundations. This is because, as is noted, the success or failure makes or mars children's future educational development. According to Maduewesi (1996:11), the primary school age is adequate as it leaves an escape route or error margin to take care of the natural problem of age uncertainty which is an endemic feature of illiterate cultures like Nigeria.

Objectives And Curricular Provisions

Education is a life-long process. Its aim generally speaking is to produce functional members of the society, people who would be able to solve problems as they evolve. Obviously, this is achieved through the curriculum. Curriculum, therefore, is made up of three components. These are programmes of studies, programmes of activities and programmes of guidance and counselling.

Thus the objectives and curricular provision of primary education as contained in the NPE (1981) clearly articulated two things necessary at this level. These are to equip all Nigerian children of primary school-going age with the basic skills of literacy in letters and figures. In other words, primary education should produce well qualified boys and girls regardless of sex, ethnic group, socio-economic background, and religion, who are capable of going to secondary schools or colleges to be trained for various services that the country needs for development. It could equally be said to inculcate in the children the ability to read and write as well as communicate effectively. This is why primary education stands crucial because of all the valuable skills which the average person learns in a life time, the ability to read easily heads the list because it is the most universal and the most generally useful for every one today. Hence, world leaders attach so much importance to teaching every child to read or to write because the leading nations are the reading nations (Campbell, 1964). It is in recognition of this that the Universal Primary Education (UPR) was launched in 1976 to avail every Nigerian child the opportunity to acquire these basic skills. And in spite of huge financial and material involvement on the part of the Nigerian government, the extent it succeeded is better imagined than discussed. Now, another universal free and compulsory education called the UBE was launched on 29th September, 1999 at Sokoto. Sokoto State, according to Vo Moses (1999) was chosen for the launching because the State currently has the lowest primary school enrolment.

These underscore the need for literate citizens, people who could read and write. Also, Maduewesi (1996) quoting Jefferson, a famous American President opined that in one of his

loiters, lie emphasized the absolute need for literate citizenry, that people who read can be free because reading banishes ignorance and superstition. Continuing, she reported that Voltaire was to have asked, "who leads mankind" and the answer came: Those who know how to read and write. These clearly show the place of primary education in nation building and because of these, the primary education curriculum in Nigeria is broad-based.

The curriculum modules prepared under the auspices of the National Implementation Committee that was chaired by a renowned educationist Chief Sofiohan are in use in the primary schools nation-wide. According to the then Honourable Minister of Education the modules will revolutionize classroom practice and thus raise the quality of primary education. In point of stress, the modules brings uniformity in classroom primary school practice throughout the country. Other curriculum provisions worthy of note is the continuous assessment (CA) which if primary school teachers had willingly accepted, the spirit underlying it and practice it will go a long way in uplifting primary education in Nigeria.

Thus, the curriculum is designed to give primary school children a general orientation in the basic academic, social and physical skills. For example, pupils are exposed to the study of science and development of science orientation, social studies, health and physical education, moral and religious education, music, arts and craft, home science, agriculture, English language and the language of immediate environment, mathematics with new emphasis on quantitative and verbal aptitude as well as computer education.

These curricula' provisions are commendable and good but the extent they achieve the objectives leaves much to be desired. One then asks where lies the problem? And what are the key issues affecting primary education in Nigeria?

Issues and Problems Militating The Achievement Of The Objectives Of Primary Education 1. Control Ami Management Of Primary Education

No education, primary or otherwise, can be successfully run unless there is good administration and control (Ozigi and Ocho, 1981). Therefore, a major problem of primary education is inconsistencies in the control and its management. This started with the introduction of formal education and lasting till today. Take for instance, it started with the missionaries in 1842, shifting to the voluntary agencies and local authorities shortly before the state take over of schools in 1970. At other times, it was the joint responsibility of the states and local government to control primary education without clear directives from the federal government such that states rather accepting this 1979 constitutional provision shifted the management of primary education completely to the local governments whose members were politicians and corrupt. The situation continues to worsen to the extent that within the six year period that range from 1988 to 1993. three different decrees had been issued prescribing management bodies. These decrees are:

(a) The National Primary Education Commission (NPF.C) Decree 31 of August 8, 1988. This decree-

was promulgated by General Ibrahim Babangida. The decree provides that ownership and control of primary education in Nigeria now be the responsibility of federal, state and local governments.

By this arrangement, the federal government accepted to pay 65% of salaries of personnel working in the primary schools in Nigeria. The states and local governments should share the remaining 35%. However, the modality for sharing the 35% allowed both state and the federal governments was not stated and so it was poorly directed and contradictory.

(b) The Local Government Education Decree 3 of January I, 1991. This decree replaced Decree 31

and placed full autonomy of management and control of primary education back to the local governments. In this regard, local government's share of the national revenue was increased from

10% to 15% and from 15% to 20% respectively while reducing the State share from 30% to 25%.

Also, local government's share of federal grant was no longer remitted to it through the State but directly to it. This increased the powers of Chairmen of local governments over things within the

local government primary education inclusive. Unfortunately, most of the chairmen were

half
educated and were politicians. They knew nothing about management strategies and money
meant
for primary schools in their area of authority were embezzled and by this act reduced further the
standard of education (Aguokogbuo, 2000).

- (e) The National Primary Education Decree 96 of 1993. With the promulgation of this decree, the federal government accepted to pay teachers' salaries through the NPEC. This is a welcome relief in spite of the fact that chairmen of local governments were complaining of usurpation of their powers. However, the point being made is that the proscription of management bodies within short intervals of six years is not good for policy implementation.

2. Teacher Factor

The teacher assumes an enviable position in curriculum implementation. No matter the appropriateness of the learning experiences selected, it is teachers that in the final analysis, that determines the corresponding learning outcome. This is because their major task is to stimulate learning and as such engage in the act of making learners learn. They know the amount of learning that is suitable for the learner at a period of time as well as within an academic year. Also, the teacher is in a position to orient their idea of societal values to the dominant values which the curriculum planner want to promote. Hence the quality of development of any society depends on teachers (Aguokogbuo, 2000).

According to Ukeje (1991), it is the teachers that translate policies and programmes into action. Also, Lassa (1996:1) opined that the teacher is the initiator of the learning process, the learning skills, the co-ordinator of the learning sequence, the assessor of the learning efficiency, and indeed the pivotal element in the entire educational development. In spite of this enviable role of the teachers in curriculum implementation and societal development, teachers are not well treated by the government. For instance, the proposed teachers' salary scale (TSS) is yet to be implemented; and now primary school teachers have come to believe that government is not interested in their welfare and that their contributions to the education of pupils are appreciated. Obviously, this kind of education of feeling by teachers affects their performance and productivity and thus militates against the realisation of the objectives of primary education. What now seems most disturbing is the near phased out of the Teacher Grade Two (TCII) training institutions to produce suitable teachers for the primary schools.

The present situation where the National Certificate in Education (NCE) graduates are drafted to teach in the primary school is at present, wrong. This is because their curriculum is designed to enable them teach in the junior level of the secondary school and not in the primary schools. Besides, in the primary schools, one teacher teaches all the numerous primary school subjects and we know that the NCE graduates are not exposed to these primary school subjects. However, one may argue that primary education departments in colleges of education should be able to produce suitable teachers for primary schools. But the position is that so many colleges of education have no primary education departments to start with. Even where there are primary education departments, the curriculum is not such that will enable the NCE graduates effectively teach the primary school subjects.

Also, the complexities in primary school subjects even demand that no single teacher should teach all the primary school subjects since there are now new introduced subjects such as the computer studies, primary science etc.

3. Infrastructural Facilities

Infrastructural facilities in schools are many and varied, they include school buildings, and classrooms, libraries, desks, seats and chairs, tables, cupboards, books and stationeries, laboratories and its equipment such as chemicals and other incidental materials. These facilities are very important in teaching and learning. The government realised the importance of these facilities in primary schools when it stated in the National Policy on Education (1981) that "government will ensure that suitable textbooks and libraries are provided for schools". According to Adesina (1990), an important index for assessing the quality and standards of education is an examination of the infrastructure facilities available for learning. In fact, primary school is the bedrock upon which future educational career of the child is based and determined.

Therefore, children at the primary school need good environment that includes adequate infrastructural facilities and care. Unfortunately, an examination of the availability and adequacy of these materials in the primary schools in Nigeria is better imagined than discussed. The dilapidated

condition of the school buildings of many primary schools, constitute a real source of worry. Okpala (1980) noted that in the primary school, where children should be playing with teaching aids, one finds nothing but "dull uninviting sagging roof and four colourless dilapidating walls". It is under this appalling condition that our children and their teachers are squatting in the name of education. Also, Nloh { 1971 } reported that in many schools in Nigeria, there is not even chalk and paper, library, hooks, etc. are non-existent. In fact, in Enugu State for example, the library is yet to be found in any public primary school.

Maduewesi (1996) opined that when we bring up primary school children in buildings looking like rat holes, mud and wattle, we can only expect in return a rough and uncouth generation. "What a child beholds, that is what he becomes"¹. This presupposes that the learning environment to which the child is exposed to determines learning.

4. Incessant Strike Actions

The frequent and lengthy disruption of primary school activities by teachers¹ strike is another major factor. In fact, in the past ten years, strikes by primary and secondary school teachers over non-payment of their salaries led to the closure of many schools. Between 1991 and 1993 alone, primary schools in 130 local government areas were in session for fewer than five months (Newswatch, 1994). Because of the strike, most pupils had lost the opportunity to take entrance examinations which would enable them to enter colleges in October of that year.

New intakes into federal colleges could not start classes until January, 1995. The ugly effect of these are many and varied for example, the situation in most states of the federation has led to increase in the number of illegal schools. In Lagos State alone, Ministry of Education officials estimated that there are two hundred and fifty (250) illegal nursery and primary schools. Because the proprietors of the schools had no money to hire qualified teachers they employ people who ordinarily had no business being in the classroom.

Other effects of frequent strikes include despondency, lack of trust, feeling of indifference, lack of commitment to teaching and learning by these primary school pupils and their teachers. According to Maduewesi (1990), such a situation begets a generation who have perhaps not acquired the basic skills for further education including communication skills, ability to sustain concentration on a task, discipline to stick to a task until completion, poor language use and comprehension.

5. Lack Of Guidelines On The Establishment Of Primary Schools

From the management and primary structure of primary education already discussed, government have not been serious with this all important level of education. Evidenced also is the fact that primary schools are established and located at nooks and crannies of the country because of lack of guidelines on its establishment. This has far reaching consequences toward the implementation of the objectives of the primary education in Nigeria. For example, the problem of infrastructural facilities, lack of proper community funding and maintenance, teacher factor as well as control are likely problems of indiscriminate establishment of primary schools in Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i Government should remunerate teachers adequately. They should as a matter of urgency, implement the teachers' salary scale (TSS). These will restore trust and teachers will be committed to their job.
- ii A very important factor of learning at this level of education is an understanding of one's environment and the need for proper structuring of the environment. In view of this, environmental education should be included in the curriculum.
- iii There should be a national primary education board (the like of NPEC) as well as linkage boards in States and Local Governments that are responsible only to the National Board.
- iv Government should do all within its power to insulate primary education programme from the corrupt politicians.
- v The three tiers of government as well as parents should close ranks and fund it. The federal government should pay staff salaries and allowances. Money for the payment of staff salaries and allowances should be earmarked from the federation account and deposited into an education account or a Education Development Fund. On the other hand, states should provide needed buildings as well as teaching materials while the local governments should provide school furniture and see to the maintenance of school buildings. To be able to do this, revenue allocation

formula should be reviewed upwards in favour of the States and Local Governments and these

functions should be closely supervised. Also, parents who benefit from the education of their children should provide textbooks and school uniform to their children. This will make for qualitative education and the achievement of the objectives of the primary education.

- vi Teacher Grade Two training institutions should as a matter of urgency be re-established (to complement few colleges of education that have primary education department and whose curriculum is basically geared toward graduating teachers that will be suitable to teach in the primary schools. Therefore, NCB graduates other than these should never be allowed to teach in the primary education.
- vii The situation in our primary schools where one teacher teaches all the primary school subjects is unacceptable especially now new subjects are included in the curriculum.
- viii Government should issue a policy guideline to be followed by communities and all who wish to establish primary schools.

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