

FREE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: ANTECEDENTS AND BASIS FOR NATION BUILDING

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Abstract

Government places high premium on primary education. It believes that what would be achieved at the secondary and tertiary levels of education will depend largely on the foundation laid at the primary level. Also, full enrolment at the primary level will provide a solution to the question of educational imbalance in the country. However, an assessment of earlier programmes of free, universal primary education shows minimal contribution to the development of education as intended due to lack of serious planning and commitment by government. With effective implementation of the 1999 UBE Scheme geared towards achieving the objective of primary education in Nigeria and directed at solving the problem of educational imbalance, the scheme shall be the basis for nation building.

Introduction

Primary school is the foundation of all education through the world. Thus in assessing the status of primary school in Nigeria General Yakubu Gowon who was the Nigerian Head of State 1966-75 once said that the basic and most important solution to the question of educational imbalance in the country must be found at the primary school level and all energies must be geared towards increasing throughout the federation especially in educationally backward areas, the primary school population progressively until primary education becomes free and compulsory for all children in Nigeria. (Gowon, 1975).

Different Governments in Nigeria whether military or civilian have made attempts to make primary education free and compulsory. For instance, in 1955 a free and universal primary education was launched in Western Nigeria and in 1957 in Eastern Nigeria. Both efforts provoked serious discussions over the wisdom or otherwise. Again in 1976, the Obasanjo military government launched Universal Primary Education. This was with the implication for making primary education free and compulsory throughout Nigeria as soon as possible. Surprisingly, the year 1999 has again witnessed launching of universal primary education.

One wonders therefore if the issue is not over-flogged for each successive administration has ways introduced a new dimension. Since government continues to revisit it again and again, then it shall also continue to attract series of discussions. This paper attempts to examine Universal Primary Education in Nigeria with its implications for educational development. Specifically, the paper seeks to substantially review the 1955 and the 1976 U. P. E. schemes with a view to identifying the challenges for the 2000 representation U. B. E. scheme.

Free Universal Primary Education In Historical Perspective

A brief historical excursion into the history of universal primary education in Nigeria, it is hoped, will give us an insight into the problem of study. Since the enactment of the 1882 Education Ordinance, government had continued to legislate on education matters, even since the period of self-government (1952-1959) won by the political struggles of the Nigerian nationalist movement. The emergence of Regional Government, which in case of the Western Region, was formed by the Chief Obafemi Awolowo led Action Group party.

In the quest for rapid development and in pursuance of meaningful educational development, the Western Regional Government gave education highest priority. Consequently, in July 1952, Chief S. O. Awokoya, the Minister of Education presented a proposal for the introduction of a free, universal primary education (UPE), which eventually came into being on 17 January, 1955. While presenting the proposal to the House of Assembly on 30 July, 1952, Chief Awokoya in his opinion: "educational development is imperative and urgent. It must be treated as national emergency, second only to war. It must move with the momentum of a revolution".

Meanwhile, the Government of the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (N. C. N. C) which controlled Eastern Region could not ignore the challenges posed by the Action Group controlled

government in the West, missionary opposition notwithstanding. By February 1957 therefore, the Eastern Region launched its own U. P. B. scheme, in a move that was more political than philosophical.

However, the General Olusegun Obasanjo led federal government launched the universal free primary education programme on September 6th 1976, the first time the programme was launched

nation wide. Interestingly, the present civilian government has once again launched the Universal Basic Education Programme in September, 1999. As explained in the Punch Editorial of January 20th 2000, the Obasanjo (civilian) administration launched the programme with a view to expanding the focus and scope of the previous Universal Primary Education programme (UPE) which the then murtala/Obasanjo regime had introduced in 1976. No doubt, Government places high premium on primary education. It believes that "what would be achieved at the secondary and tertiary levels will depend largely on the foundation laid at the primary level" (NPE, 1981).

II UPE Schemes and Attendant Implication in Retrospect

The laudable scheme as expected, attracted a resounding applause from the general public, and its serious implications for educational development in the country. What are these implications in the context of pupils' enrolment, human and material resources and number of schools?

Student Enrolment

The U. P. E. Scheme in the Western Region sky-rocketed in pupil enrolment in the primary schools from fee paying 446, 600 in 1954 to non-fee 811, 432 in 1955; an increase of over 90% in one year (Ejiogu, 1988). By 1961 primary school enrolment in the West had risen to 1,134,788 pupils. In the words of Fafunwa (1974), indeed "January 1955 marked the beginning of an educational revolution not only in the West but in Nigeria as a whole".

As would be expected, pupils' enrolment in the Eastern Region rose up astronomically from 904, 167 in 1956 to a staggering 1, 209, 167 in 1957 when the UPE scheme was launched in the East. Free Universal Primary Education scheme therefore, was synonymous with increase in pupils' enrolment. This was also evidenced in the spontaneous increase in enrolment of pupils when the General Olusegun Obasanjo led Federal Government launched the UPE programme on September. 6. 1976, It is on record that at the announcement of the scheme, 3 million children turned, up for primary one, 0.7 million pupils above the projected figure (Arubayi, 1992).

Table 1: Primary School Enrolment Figures By Regions 1953-1959

Year	East	Lagos	North	West	Total
1953	572,705	-	143,809	429,542	1,146,056
1954	664,707	-	153,696	456,600	1,275,003
1955	742,542	37,038	168,521	811,432	1,759,533
1956	904,235	38,872	185,484	908,022	2,036,613
1957	1,209,167	50,182	205,769	982,755	2,447,873
1958	1,221,272	56,688	299,164	1,037,388	2,544,512
1959	1,378,403	66,320	250,912	1,080,303	2,775,938

Source: Adapted from Fafunwa - History of Education in Nigeria (1974)

Table II: Estimated Primary School Enrolment under The University Free Primary Education 1975-1985 (November in Thousands)

Year	Estimate
1970	3,350
1975	6,850
1980	16,300
1985	1,900

Source: Adapted from Adesina (1981:189)

Numbers of Schools and Classroom

Alongside the increment in pupils' enrolment was expansion of schools in terms of increase in number of schools and classrooms. In the Western Region for example, the capital expenditure for the construction of primary schools' building was £2.4 million for 1955. while a total of £5 million was committed to primary school building between 1954 and 1958 (Fafunwa, 1974). In the east classroom facilities were improvised. The improvisation was perhaps as a result of shortness of time to plan for the scheme.

Human Resources

As recorded by (Fafunwa, 1974) the number of primary school teachers rose from 17,000 in 1954 to 27,000 in 1955 in the West. In the East, the launching of the scheme led to the recruitment and appointment of untrained teachers, as there was not enough time to train them. The launching of the scheme on September 6, 1976 involved 48,780 additional teachers. Correspondingly, there was also an increase in the number of non-teaching staff since more schools were consequently established.

Finally, the various U.P.H. schemes resulted in huge financial involvement. This increase is both in recurrent and capital expenditure, which can be seen from the projection, contained in Table III below.

Table III: Summary Of The Main Implication Of Sustaining The U.P.E. Scheme (1975-85)

		1975	1980	1985
1	No of primary school enrolment (000)	6860	163000	198000
2	No of classrooms required	171250	407600	495000
3	Primary school teachers required	230196	541767	665399
4	Teachers' salaries (000)	4289	101.9m	123.8m
5	Additional primary School teachers required	114000	295000	120000

Source: Adapted from Adesina (1981:91)

IJPE Schemes: An Assessment

There are usually models of assessing or measuring effectiveness, of any organization or scheme. In our assessment of the 1955 and 1976 UPE schemes, we shall enjoy both the Gral and the system approach models. The Gral approach considers effectiveness from the perspective of accomplishment of recognized objectives, Nwankwo, et al (Onoyase, 1981) said the approach has proved to be useful. Meanwhile, the general objectives of primary education as stated in section 3, paragraph 14 of the National Policy on Education are:

- a. The inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively;
- b. The laying of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- c. Citizenship education, as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- d. Character and moral training and the development of sound attitudes;
- e. Developing in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment;
- f. Giving the child opportunities for manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capacity;
- g. Providing (he basic tools for further educational advancement including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

The above objectives pose serious challenges therefore to the government by providing required resources and a well-articulated curriculum for primary education. We can not achieve the afore listed objectives in the absence of required number of qualified teachers, desks, classroom and teaching materials and faculties.

Also, the application of systems principles shall be used to harmonize the various sub-systems involved in the scheme. These sub-systems include adequate and quality teaching personnel, accurate teaching faultless equipment and instructional materials. The assessment of the U.P.E. scheme from Gral approach show that the primary education objective of permanent literacy and numeracy in the citizenry particular in the west was achieved. This is attested to by the views of Olaogbe in his letter to the Chairman of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) that "we wish (o remind you that you are dealing with a segment of the country (i.e. the Western states) where at least 75% of the citizens are literate". As cited in Ejiogu (1988) however, the aim of providing a functional primary education system can not be said to have been achieved as shoddy implementation resulted in quality achievement rather than qualify.

On the other hand, an assessment of the scheme from the systems approach reveals that the scheme was be-deviled by poor implementation. As a result, the UPE schemes have not contributed to the development of education in the country as intended. It is common knowledge that a suitable percentage of the national wealth was invested into the scheme but the desire to bring about an effective learning system has remained a dream. The situation was characterized by untrained personnel, lopsidedness in distribution of teachers and facilities, lack of adequate facilities and equipment, and non-self renewal mechanism.

Another inhibiting factor is the lack of accurate data. There was no reliable figure to base their plans. The projection for the 1976 intake was based on the 1963 census and we know how inaccurate such projection can be. This situation could not have achieved the objective of laying a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking as envisaged in the National Policy on Education. Importantly, Ukcje as cited in (Ejiogu, 1988) sees the failure of the UPE scheme as the danger that could arise when no clear line of distinction existed between politics and educational issues.

Challenges For The Universal Basic Education

In the Punch Editorial of Thursday, January 20, 2000, it was stated that the Obasanjo (civilian) administration launched the UBE programme partly because earlier programmes were abandoned by subsequent administrations. Given this background one would have expected that adequate planning would have been done before the 1999 launching. Surprisingly, in the National Concord, Thursday, January 25, 2000, the Cross River State Commissioner for Education, Mr. Mike Upan Aniah, was reported as saying that the programme was bereft of adequate planning. He stated that there is a lot of planning to be done. In the past, it was erroneously thought that the problem was only that of funding. We need to know in greater detail the number of schools that we have and the number we require, students enrolment, state of drop out, teacher/pupil ratio, subject matter distribution, extent of rehabilitation required, to bring our schools to a functional level, quality control and subjects required.

In the same vein Governor Abdullahi Adamu of Nasarawa State, observed that the UPE, which is the antecedent of UPE scheme, did not yield the desired results not for lack of relevance but because of lack of total commitment by government and the people (Concord, 18 January, 2000).

A detailed review of the defunct UPE programme brings to focus the challenges of the UPE scheme. The excess of 0.7 million children in 1976 had no teachers, no desks, no benches, no classroom and no provisions whatever was made for them in terms of funds. It amounted to "planning without facts" (Arubayi, 1992). Closely related to the issue of data is that of teachers. For instance (Yoloye, 1984) told us that many of the primary school teachers are earlier unqualified or under-qualified and that the percentage of qualified staff ranged (in 1976-77) from about 10% for Kaduna and Sokoto states to about 65% in Imo State.

No doubt a proper implementation of the UBE scheme will make it valuable too for nation building. Its realization of nation building will be in two spheres, educational imbalance between the North and the South and in achieving the objectives of Primary Education as spelt out in the National Policy on Education. The National Policy on Education believes that what would be achieved at the secondary and tertiary levels will depend largely on the foundation laid at the primary level. It emphasized that government places high premium on primary education for it is "the key to the success or failure of the whole system".

The issue of educational imbalance is becoming a disturbing political one in recent times. It is unfortunate that government and political leaders are seeking solution to educational imbalance by speaking to enrolment into institutions of higher learning. The solution to education imbalance lies in the primary school enrolment; therefore, it is now that the UBE scheme has been launched. This we can achieve through aggressive enrolment of pupils into primary one nation wide. This will however, call for reinforcement on the part of government by seriously monitoring pupils' progress to arrest drop out of pupils on a large scale.

With effective implementation of the 1999 UBU scheme geared towards achieving (the Objectives of primary education in Nigeria and directed at solving the problems of educational imbalance, the scheme shall be the basis for nation building.

Conclusion

The introduction of Universal Primary Education in the past brought about expansion in terms

of increase in number of schools and classrooms. Also, there was an increase in pupil's enrolment with resultant increase in number of teachers. It incurred huge financial involvement in both recurrent and capital expenditure. However, an assessment of the scheme revealed that they were be-deviled by poor implementation. This was characterized by lack of an accurate data to plan with, lack of required teachers, and lack of adequate facilities and instructional materials. As a result, the earlier schemes could not truly contribute to the development of education in Nigeria as intended.

It is therefore, highly recommended that for the current Universal Basic Education to succeed Government should ensure as follows:

Recommendations

That teachers are provided in adequate number and quality; That it demonstrates sincere commitment to the programme by funding it adequately;

That data banks be created in all the states of the country from where data can be generated for planning;

Pupils¹ registration of or the programme should be made a priority. To achieve this, there should be serious campaign and publicity of the programme particularly in the perceived educationally backwards state.

There should be serious interest in the provision of infrastructure materials and furniture.

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