

# CURRICULUM, CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND PEDAGOGY: UNDERSTANDING THE WORK OF TEACHERS AT THE BASIC EDUCATION LEVEL IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

An approach to educational development is a multi-faceted affair, with many dimensions on which decisions must be made and numerous alternatives from which to choose on each dimension. Of primary importance, however, is that the alternatives selected be commonly understood and agreed upon and that they reflect consistency from one dimension to the next. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was introduced in Nigeria to meet the key targets of national concerns and the curriculum was to be more practical, relevant, interest generating to the young learners, and in line with global best practices. This article focused on the concern and ways national school knowledge, traditions (conventional ideas) permeate through to systemic features, to the curriculum and to teachers' pedagogies in the classrooms. Findings from study demonstrate that national cultural tradition of Nigeria is a major determinant and it influences the system of schooling at this level of education. Recommendations that curricula and pedagogies need to be analysed and understood amongst others are made.

**Key words:** Cultural Traditions, Pedagogy, Basic Education

Changing economic, social and political situations in both developed and developing countries have combined to create needs for constant innovations and reforms in educational curriculum. This is more prominent in developing countries where from the late 1950s to mid-1970s independence from colonial administrators and in some cases, new found wealth based on natural resources have contributed to a redefinition of social priorities and objectives (Adamu, 1994). It is on record that by late 1950s and early 1960s, there was general agreement among politicians, educational and social planners, and schools that education was a key change agent for moving societies along the development continuum as educational systems were said to produce the skilled manpower and the new knowledge requisite for technological advancement and economic growth. However, reports have it that since these periods, academic initiatives from the developing countries themselves has been very slow. This would explain the dearth of relevant literature particularly with regards to theories dealing with educational innovation processes in these developing countries.

In general, the focus of education system all over the world is the development of the human capital required to meet present and future challenges of globalization and knowledge economy (Dike, 2014). Consequently, the second international congress on Technical and Vocational Education in Seoul, Korea identified challenges that would inform changes in education as:

- i. poverty and lack of skills for income generation; and
- ii. low participation rate in technical and vocational education (Obioma, 2011).

Hence the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) recognizes that Nigeria's economy could only be transformed and sustained through education that empowers the people and assures the technological development of the country. In response to this, the country has witnessed two major curriculum reform initiatives at the Basic education level, namely:

1. The 9 – year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) (2008 – 2014); and
2. The revised 9 - year Basic Education Curriculum (2014 to date).

### **The Structure of the 9 – year Basic Education Curriculum**

Curriculum in its conventional usage, refers to the “scope and sequence” of the subject-matter conveyed in a school. Curriculum development at any level therefore, focuses on the selection and organization of specific knowledge and skills to fit particular developmental needs of the students and the unique operational structure of the school. The structure of the 9- year Basic Education Curriculum was such that subject's offerings ranged between ten and sixteen from primary I to JSS III and almost every subject was a stand-alone subject. For example, Basic Science, Basic Technology, Physical and Health Education, Computer Studies/ICT, Christian Religious studies/Islamic studies, Civic Education, Home Economics, Agricultural Science, and Business Studies are all Separate subjects (FME, 2008) as reported by (Igbokwe 2015).

The 9 – year Basic Education Curriculum was particularly developed for the attainment of the Education for All (EFA) goals, the critical targets of the National Economic Empowerment and Development strategies (Needs), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This programme was developed in response to Nigeria's need for relevant, dynamic and globally competitive education that would ensure that learners at the Basic Education level are capable to compete favourably anywhere in the world in terms of knowledge, skills, techniques, values and aptitude. Thus, the 9 – year Basic Education Curriculum addressed among other things, the issue of value orientation, poverty eradication, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and life skills. This programme came into function nationwide in September 2008 with primary 1 and JSS 1 classes. The old curriculum of 6-3-3-4 was systematically phased out.

### **The Revised 9-year Basic Education Curriculum**

The school curriculum is a dynamic and open document that is constantly changing with the needs, challenges and aspirations of the society. Thus, the feedback on the implementation of the 9-year BEC received and the contemporary global and national concerns generated the revised 9-year BEC in 2014. The curriculum revision process involved identification and grouping of related disciplines such as Christian Religious Studies/Islamic studies, social Studies, Civic Education and Security Education to create a new composite or cluster of revised BEC subject called Religion and National Values.

The structure of both the original and revised 9-year BEC is presented as follows:

- Lower Basic Education Curriculum – Primaries 1 – 3;
- Middle Basic Education curriculum – Primaries 4-6; and
- Upper Basic Education Curriculum – Junior Secondary JS 1-3

The subjects and contents at these various stages flow systematically and spirally from primary 1 to JSS 3. Since the curriculum represents the total experiences to which all learners must be exposed, the contents, performance objectives, activities for both teachers and learners, teaching and learning materials and evaluation guide are provided.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) (2014) made the following provision in its section 5 on the JSS: The Junior secondary school will be both Pre-vocational and academic which is meant to teach all the basic subjects that will enable pupils to acquire further knowledge and develop skills. This specification seems clear enough in establishing the nature and purpose of the JSS reform. However the Joint Consultative Council (JCC) Reference committee on Junior Secondary Education had long held a different view and stated the aims of the JSS reform in a report in 1985 as follows:

The aim is to make him/her achieve some level of competence in the chosen vocation that will make him/her immediately employable at the end of the years of JSS education.

### **Implementation Strategy of the Revised 9-year Basic Education Curriculum**

Curriculum implementation according to Afangideh (2009) as cited by Moemeke & Onyeagwu (2017) is the way content which embodies structure, organization, balance and presentation in the classroom is designed and delivered. It is the ability to put the content and instructional guidelines into practice in the classroom. In other words, curriculum implementation is the actual engagement of learners with planned learning opportunities which is the stage when in the midst of learning activities, teachers and learners are involved in negotiations aimed at promoting learning.

The four basic dimensions of any educational programme are

1. The goals or objectives
2. The content
3. The structure, and
4. The methods use.

If an approach is to be effective, all four dimensions must be functionally integrated, and consistent with the underlying processes through which they interact to form a whole. This means that each dimension must be mutually reinforcing of each of the other dimensions if the total educational experience is to be cumulative and integrative for the student. To achieve such interrelatedness requires close attention to underlying processes of education such as communication, cognition, and social interaction. All these are the function of the teacher. No wonder Dike (2014) remarked that it is not enough to produce curriculum, it is even more important to put in place machinery that will ensure that its ideals are realizable through effective classroom practices. For instance though the implementation of the revised 9-year BEC for long commenced systematically in primary I and JSS 1, it is known according to Abakpa & Agbo-Egwu (2013) that the structures and appropriate activities that foster effective implementation of the curriculum are either inadequate or lacking in Nigerian schools. Foremost among the myriad of challenges of Basic Education in Nigeria are the issues of teacher and inadequate supervision and mentoring of teachers. Thus, to realize the ideals of the 9 – year BEC, relevant support materials that will aid effective delivery of the curricula content in schools must be provided. Such materials include computers, functional laboratories, learner-centred textual materials and other instructional aids to generate learner’s interest and challenge them in innovative and creative thinking. Basic Education teachers are also to undergo in-service training in their subject areas on continuous basis. In addition, series of national workshops using interactive and activity-based approaches should be organized to train the teachers in the use of teacher’s guides for effective delivery of the BEC curriculum content.

### **Cultural Traditions and Systematic Features**

Teachers at the Basic Education Programme have many tasks and responsibilities in the schools. Beside the task of form teachers, they hold positions of responsibility within their special subject areas of responsibility in administration or staff councils in the school. In the classrooms, teachers are expected to be encouraged to attend to the needs of every individual child. The principle of morality expected teachers to spend a considerable amount of time developing the child which is in the light of the national cultural tradition of Nigeria. They were expected to prepare their lessons in such a way that learning experiences will be as mind training as possible for the students. The very unfortunate aspect of it all is that teachers had no pre-knowledge of what to do at the Basic Education level.

In terms of organization in groups, it can be argued that the practices of streaming and setting pupils were influenced by the schooling system (which, in turn, was underpinned by cultural traditions). These traditions are likely to depend on philosophical beliefs about education.

### **Cultural Assimilation**

One of the most distinguishing features of schools in cultural setting is their overwhelming process toward assimilation into the mainstream of cultural patterns. Whether intentional or not, the basic thrust of schooling is toward the breaking down of one particular aspect of culture and developing in their place, a universally accepted culture. Even where accommodations are made to include ethnic studies or bilingual education in the curriculum content, the structure, method and processes through which the content is organized and transmitted are usually reflective of mainstream patterns and exert a dominant influence on the student (Bayne, 1969 as cited by Barnhardt, 1981). Schools are agents of the dominant society and as such, they reflect the underlying cultural patterns of that society. As long as they reflect the structure and social organization of the dominant society, they can be expected to perpetuate its values, attitudes, and behavior patterns within an implicit framework of assimilation. Hence, there is need for the orientation of students toward cultural assimilation.

A cultural assimilation orientation would seem to offer the student an opportunity to gain access to the skills and resources necessary to participate in the larger society on equal terms with others. However, this expectation often goes unfulfilled because of the school's inability to adequately respond to the differences in thought, communication and social interaction on the part of the student. Consequently, the requisite skills are not learned, status differentials are reinforced, and access to societal resources is further impeded, thus thwarting the students' aspirations. The school cannot contribute effectively to the assimilation process without careful attention to the unique cultural condition out of which the students emerge.

For assimilation to be achieved in full, it must be supported by social, political and economic forces beyond those available through the school. Though, the school alone may not be able to accomplish this task.

### **The Community and the Classroom**

To develop an approach to education that has the potential for application to varied cultural and situational conditions, teachers must go beyond the simple version of curriculum content or classroom teaching practices. They must take into account the interactional setting itself, and find ways to restructure the social organization of that setting to allow the participants to pattern their interaction to fit the goals they are attempting to achieve. As with the content, they need a structure

that is flexible and adaptable enough to accommodate a wide range of cognitive, communicative, and interactional patterns, while maintaining some degree of order and continuity in terms of overall direction and effort.

### **Cultural Traditions and Pedagogies**

From literature, Hanks, Mcleod, and Urdang (1986) as quoted by Pepin (1998) defined pedagogy as principles, practice or profession of teaching. Onyeagwu (2016) sees pedagogy as the management strategies used for classroom instruction. In other words, it is a way of doing the teaching business, the procedure orderliness, in planning and execution of teaching properly with the appropriate integration of instructional materials to achieve the objectives at the classroom level and beyond the classroom. Teachers use whole class teaching where they spent relatively little time on explaining to the whole class. In the light of traditions of individualism, teachers use a whole-class teaching to explain a concept from the front in a relatively didactic way i.e. teachers telling the students everything without allowing them find out something for themselves, and unless the lesson took the form of an “investigation, most teachers introduced and explained a concept or skill to students, give examples on the board and then expected students to practice on their own in small groups while they saw their duty to attend to individual students. Another teachers’ routine which are culturally determined is that teachers mark every student’s work about once a week. This is a routine in which teaches understood that their concern was to analyze individual student’s difficulties. Teachers felt that it helped them to analyse diagnostically student understanding, and as a result, to identify any problem areas that individual students might have. Another reason was that they wanted to give students individual feedback which also traditionally is expected by the heads of department, heads of school and parents.

In terms of principles of teaching, situations where students discover multiple solutions or investigate new solutions which require reasoning are rare and are usually reserved for “investigation” lessons. In the classroom, the major aim is to convey a concept and let the students get as much practice as possible. But what usually happen is that emphasis is on the skill side of learning which do not emphasize the rational training of the mind. In short, there has been a history of failure of implementing curriculum guidelines as it is not enough to write a guideline and expect teachers to implement them. Another major issue relates to the government’s involvement through the national curriculum body. This has influenced teachers’ practices in the sense that teachers are asked to “do investigation” without understanding the underlying philosophy of it. The national curriculum might have helped them to think about its ‘coverage’, ‘delivery’ and testing, but it left out the notion that teaching and learning were complex activities which involve cognitive conflicts. The whole thrust seemed to be towards a kind of ‘technical implementation teaching’ that there is a set of rules which anybody can teach if he/she is shown how to do it.

### **Teaching and Content: The Situational Variable**

In the development of a social structure for an educational programme, one must take into account the contextual features of the settings in which learning is to take place, because, content is a major influence in the shaping of any learning process. Of particular concern are the varied cultural and situational patterns reflected in the learning experiences associated with school versus community settings. The question is, is one type of setting more appropriate than another for particular kinds of learning experiences? Another area of concern is in remote rural schools with large classes and the

uncertainties of teacher and student presence as well as the social, economic and cultural backgrounds of students' homes in relation to pedagogy. Other areas of concern are schools for students with disabilities; how such students are integrated into schools mainstream and teachers' practices at lower level, their continuities with the primary curriculum and pedagogies. In response to these areas of concern, Maurice (1974) as cited by Obioma (2012) stated that learned behavior is determined by the environment in which it takes place. Behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences. The learning environments of any educational level tend to be of a different character. They shape and maintain different kinds of behavior. Hence, the goal of educational strategy should be to determine the kind of behavior sought and teachers are expected to create those educational environments which most clearly support and encourage it.

### **Culture and Experiential Learning at the Basic Education Level**

According to Ukeje, (1988) in Wanekezi, Okoli and Mezieobi (2011), education unlocks the nation's development but, it is the teacher who holds the key to the door. Thus, the teacher has the responsibility to put practice and programmes into action. It is clear from the foregoing that the role of the teacher in sustainable economy is specially in training personal for various areas of the workforce.

In exploring the various approaches to goals, content, and structure at the Basic Education level, teachers need to apply an approach that is dependent on some form of experiential learning. Cultural eclecticism as a goal depends on each student having the range of experiences necessary to make realistic choices in life style. The "experiential learning" serves as an educational method that is akin to the "walk about" approach method of facilitating students' transition from childhood to adult roles. The method is more than "learning by doing", "discovery" or "inquiry" methods that are sometimes supported or given by educators. It is indicative of the value of having students work it out for "themselves" which are usually employed within the context of formally structured learning activities, stopping short of the direct involvement in real life experiences. In this learning situation, students face severe but extremely appropriate trial, one in which he must demonstrate the knowledge and skill necessary to make him a contributor to knowledge. Students only write, solves familiar theoretical problems, they do not apply what they know in strange but real situations and they do not act. They are under direction in a protected environment to the end; they do not go out into the world to demonstrate that they are prepared to survive in, and contribute to the society. Their preparation is primarily for the mastery of content and skills in the disciplines and has little to do with reaching maturity, achieving adulthood, or developing fully as persons.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this discourse demonstrate that national cultural traditions are a major determinant and its influence on education system at the Basic Education level, and on teacher's pedagogies in schools. Looking at literature, there is a powerful argument that the Basic Education level is still facing a lot of challenges and issues. One of the issues that is often neglected is that national cultural traditions are the philosophical base on which the system is built. These traditions depend on philosophical beliefs about education, but once in place, they become part of the structure of the system and teachers have to work with them. These findings suggest that curricula and pedagogies need to be analyzed and understood in terms of the large cultural context and that without such understanding; changes cannot be predicted to be successful.

### **Recommendations**

In line with the findings of the discourse, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government and all relevant educational agencies are to organize series of national workshops, using interactive and activity based approaches to train teachers in the use of the teachers guide and the understanding of different pedagogies for effective delivery of the contents of the Revised 9 – year Basic Education curriculum.
2. There should be a collaborative work among basic education teachers as this can facilitate inclusion and needs of the school. There should be team sharing of knowledge, making decisions, solving problems together and generating actions in order to improve the school and to increase learning for all.
3. The different national cultural traditions influence on education must not be over looked. They should be explored as they influence the curriculum at the Basic Education level.
4. The curricula and pedagogies need to be analyzed and understood in terms of the larger cultural context.

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