

QUALITY EDUCATION AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL: SOME IMPEDIMENTS

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Abstract

The National Policy on Education (1998), defines Primary Education as education given to children between the ages of 6 to 11 years plus. In other words the primary school is one of the systems, where a child begins his formal education in an institution. It is generally regarded as the corner stone, the bedrock of a child's educational career. The belief is that, without a solid foundation at primary level of education other levels cannot be strong. They simply cannot function efficiently. So proper foundation must be laid at this level, if the other educational levels could produce the expected goals. But unfortunately, there are already cries of poor quality at this important level. Based on this the paper wants to look critically at education at the primary level, pinpoint lapses and offer solutions.

Introduction

Primary education is an important starting point of formal education in Nigeria. It is the education for children between the ages of 6 to 11 years plus. The federal government has made it accessible to quite a good number of the nation's children. Furthermore, the goals to be achieved by the end of the six years are already clearly specified by the National Policy on Education (1998). The basic education provided at the level aims at equipping those pupils who may terminate their education at this level with basic skills for engaging in gainful apprentice training in their communities. What this implies is that education offered at this level should be so complete and qualitative that a primary school graduate can effectively function in his community. However, we are aware of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) which stretches this first level to Junior Secondary Level (JSS). But it is outside the scope of this paper since the innovation is not yet operational in all states of the Federal. Therefore, our write-up is on the six years of primary education.

What does quality primary education entail? We have to first, look at the concept of quality in education before treating that question briefly since what constitutes quality education is not the main focus of this paper.

The Concept of Quality

The word quality has been defined by many educationists. A number of the definitions that agree with our own concept of quality are hereby given to enable our readers understand what it stands for in this work. For Okafor (1990), quality means excellence in academics and morals. Morals here, refer to those crucial values and attitudes needed by the child for survival in the society. Obodo (1990), says quality of a thing means the degree, especially high degree of goodness or worth of that thing. With reference to education, he sees it as a process by means of which an individual achieves high degree of goodness with regard to abilities, attitude, types of behaviour which are of positive value to the society. While Okonkwo (1990), opines that quality education is synonymous with standard in education as both have to do with degree of excellence in performance in the educational set-up. In other words, therefore, quality education at the primary level entails primary schools being able to turn out pupils who have mastered the basic skills of literacy and numeracy as required by Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (FRN 1998) that is, pupils who can read meaningfully punctuate and construct, simple correct sentences in the mother tongue and in English, fill forms correctly, carry out simple calculations of addition and subtraction so necessary in our daily lives.

From moral perspective, our primary schools should be free of cultism, examination malpractice, aggression, and disrespect to teachers/elders etc. All these are pointers to the degree of excellence in the quality of education offered in our primary schools. It is however, on record that as far back as 1961, Banjo Commission (Okonkwo 1990) noted, "falling standards in Primary School work" and also in 1977, Ajayi was said to have declared in a lecture that the average school leaver after six years of elementary school can hardly read or write (Okonkwo, 1990). Right now educationists are complaining aloud of poor standard at all sectors of educational levels. This paper,

therefore, tries to examine some impediments which militate against quality education.

Impediments to Quality Education

There are a number of impediments to qualitative education. They include teacher factor, teacher education institutions, the issue of brain drain, poor emphasis on primary education in Teacher Education, lack of instructional materials and societal values.

Teacher Factor

The importance of the teacher in the execution of educational policies has been noted by many writers. Bigelow in Onuegbu (2002), writes, "Teachers constitute the most vital factor in any educational system. Upon their numbers, devotion, quality, the effectiveness of all educational arrangements must chiefly depend". Hence, any search for a drop in quality must begin with teachers. Uwandu (1995), has this as a thesis on the topic: Falling Standard of Education in Nigeria, "Falling Standard of Education is traceable to the influx of unqualified teachers into the teaching profession". The word influx connotes very large number. The influx can be traced to the era of Universal Primary Education (UPE). The programme was launched without adequate preparation for the training of primary school teachers. The result was that all sorts of people were welcomed into the teaching field - market women, artisans, hair dressers name it. Many had not even the first school leaving certificate. They were hurriedly trained, some for one year and even less and were pushed into the primary schools. These undisciplined half baked group introduced numerous vices such as examination malpractice, poor academic knowledge, truancy, trading, lack of devotion and dedication etc into the primary system. Abodo (2002), aptly described it thus: "The Nigerian Government was ill prepared to meet the needs of the scheme in terms of provision of adequate human and materials resources". Though the Federal Government introduced crash programmes for training teachers for primary schools yet many of them could not interpret the curriculum, plan and manage the learning situations in the proper way that ensure satisfactory attainment of the intended objectives.

Many primary school teachers lack devotion. Agina-Obu (2002), subdivides primary school teachers in public schools into dedicated and non-dedicated. The latter have one eye on the job and the other on trading, and operating clearing and forwarding or 'back-warding' business with divided loyalty.

How can a teacher who moves straight from school to her private business centre have more energy for extra reading and proper preparation of her lessons? A competent well qualified teacher must still prepare his lesson before entering the class. One must not underrate devotion to duty. It helped to produce academic excellence in the past and even works nowadays in the private schools. Agina-Obu (2002:35), has the same opinion when he writes;

In the pre-war era, when voluntary agencies owned and controlled most of the schools,....teachers were better devoted and dedicated to their duties. Performance of pupils at any examination was high

Therefore, the strongest impediment to quality primary education is the low-quality of teachers and their poor dedication and ineffectiveness. The standard of education of any nation is a reflection of the quality of the teachers in that country. No nation can rise above the quality of its teachers.

Teacher Education Institution

The Federal Government realizes the importance of teacher education for the primary schools. Hence there are more colleges of education about 63 as against 31 universities (Usani 2002). To ensure quality education at the primary level the Federal Government insists on Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) as the minimum qualification. But in spite of this, standard seems to continue to fall for basic education. Another problem seems to be in the selection of those to be trained as teachers. Akpan (2002) observes: "However, while the government believes that no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers, it is ironical that it is the dregs of the educational system that are recruited in most cases to be trained as teachers".

He goes further, to give the entry requirements for admission into tertiary institutions as

follows: University - 5 credits, Polytechnics- 4 credits and Colleges of Education - 3 credits (NCE Minimum Standard 1996). In fact in this era of Pre-NCE students with only two credits are admitted for Pre-NCE programme. At the end of the one year these students learn next to nothing. This is contrary to what obtains for Pre-Sci nee programme. At least students who are admitted for such programmes must have passed five subjects at credit level.

Udofot (1990); in Akpan (2002), notes that "the Nigerian situation tends to run contrary to acceptable norms elsewhere", for example, in France after graduation, would-be teachers, face serious selection examinations (capes) and only those who pass very well are allowed to teach. Therefore teacher-educators must recruit intellectually talented individuals who would be ready always to seek more knowledge so as to keep abreast of vast changes in teaching and learning. America is said to have built her greatness in the classroom. She could not have achieved it with poor teacher education.

The Issue of Brain Drain

The next serious problem is the issue of brain drain in Colleges of Education. Every year a good number of seasoned lecturers leave the institutions either for the Universities or for greener pastures elsewhere. Reasons for leaving range from poor motivation, poor work environment, lack of facilities and research grants to denial of professorship to lecturers in the colleges of education. The situation has given rise to shortage of well qualified experienced teacher-educators in these colleges.

Teacher Education: Poor Emphasis on Primary Studies

One would have expected every College of Education to offer Primary Education Studies (PES) to all the students since NCE is the minimum qualification for teaching at the primary and junior secondary school. Only the NTI offers PES to all her students. For the others, where it is offered, only a negligible number of students do it. The rest of them without PES if posted to the primary school may not do justice to teaching and learning. Nobody can give what he has not got. So instead of their pupils learning through their use of the appropriate skills, they might end up confusing the children.

The Nigerian Government has always been known for making wonderful policies but the implementation becomes another problem. She has set up Colleges of Education but fails to equip them with required infrastructure and learning facilities. The laboratories are virtually empty, poor libraries, shortage of lecture classrooms, examination halls, lack of sitting accommodation, and staffrooms instead of offices for top ranking lecturers and so on. In some Colleges of Education students not only stand while receiving lecturers but also sit on bare floors to write their examinations. Teacher Education institutions must be planned, organized and equipped if their products are to function effectively and offer quality education in the primary schools.

Societal Values

Both the National Policy on Education (1998) and the national pledge express the desire for virtues such as honesty and dedication to duty. Our society today has utter disregard for such values. Rather the Machiavellian ideology that "the end justifies the means" rules. Ngada (2002), observed that children watch adults as they sponsor the sale and buying of question paper, engage in the falsification of results and employment given with forged certificates. One is inclined to agree with the view that the "the Nigerian students are not congenital cheats, but mirror what they see the significant members of the society (elders and leaders) do. No wonder examination malpractice is encouraged and practised even in the primary schools. Different cadres of the society are its perpetrators. Those indicated include some schools, proprietors, administrators, parents, guardians, personnel, examination bodies, teachers, influential members of the society, traditional rulers, politicians and managers of firms. How can primary school pupils excel in their studies when many already believe that nothing be won by hard work but by fraud? Is it not the same lost of faith in hard work that makes some drop out of school for trading, or whatever. Such acts of fraud will later manifest in our society as electoral fraud, bribery and corruption, pervasion of justice, political thuggery and corner-cutting. Therefore as long as examination malpractice exists at this level, quality education will continue to elude us.

In addition to the above, there is a wave of indiscipline in the society. The teacher is supposed to create an enabling environment conducive for learning but the society at times makes it

difficult for him or her to achieve this. Gone are the days when teachers discipline unruly or insulting pupils. Today such pupils insult and abuse teachers at will because they enjoy the protection of their parents. Agbarewo (2002) affirms that some teachers have been disciplined themselves for disciplining wards of commissioners permanent secretaries and those in power. As a result, some teachers, to keep out of trouble, tolerate or ignore undisciplined behaviour. Obviously this kind of environment does not promote quality learning.

Facilities

There seems to be a mismatch between the policy intentions of the Federal Government and their implementation. One area where this is glaring is in infrastructural development and equipment of schools especially the primary schools. Cooper et al (1984); in Ariniatorudikieke (2002), observed that "the primary school environment suffers in comparison with other learning environment that also forms part of the child's life". For them the Nigerian government has little or no concern and respect for primary education. In this century, some pupils still have shades of trees as their classrooms. How distractions are contained for meaningful learning is anybody's guess. Some classrooms have the walls as their chalkboards and are always noisy since they are not demarcated one from the other. Teachers are supposed to inculcate in their pupils the love for reading yet some schools have no libraries especially in rural areas. Bearing in mind that in many rural homes reading materials are scarce, then the absence of libraries in their schools is a serious defect. These pupils would become our future scientists without simple science laboratories. The same thing is applicable to sports.

Lack of Instructional Materials

Instructional materials are very necessary for sound education and for primary education, they are indispensable. Because of the pupils' ages, they cannot reason abstractly. Therefore, instructional materials are essential materials for teaching them. According to Aboho (2002), "where instructional materials are lacking, teachers resort to teaching methods that promote memorization and regurgitation of facts. Consequently learning becomes tedious, boring and inefficient". The same view is echoed by Usani (2002); "facilities in public schools are poor. Where they even existed, they are either dilapidated or broken down completely. Thus the children can hardly learn correctly from this kind of educational condition".

Solution Servicing Teachers

Over the years, teachers have been identified as rightful persons that turn the key to national development. Therefore, correcting whatever is wrong in the school system must begin with them. Besides, a highly qualitative teacher in one year soon becomes a misfit after some five years except he copes with the challenges of updating his or her skills and knowledge. Hence, we recommend intensive subjecting of the primary schools teachers to in-service training either full time or part time, workshops and seminars during the holidays. Supervisors, inspectors and teachers could determine the content areas to be covered based on teachers' needs because sometimes resource persons from universities and colleges of education do not give the teachers what they desire to *improve* themselves. As a way of inducement, financial benefits can be paid to them. After all, workers in other establishments do enjoy some financial gains for attending conferences and workshops.

Teachers who engage in trading or other business not connected with teaching and learning should be lured back to the classroom. What this means is that teachers must not only be well paid but benefits enjoyed by workers in other fields should be extended to them. This could be in forms like free medical services or allowances, increased transportation, rent allowances and comfortable working environment. The much talked about separate salary for teachers should be released and implemented. If teachers' salary and conditions of service are improved, then those who would continue with trading and other business should be fished out and disciplined. Teaching, especially, modern teaching does not require the service of two masters. The primary school teacher of this millennium should not be one with divided attention but rather one who should be "a teacher of qualitative education, a versatile material, veritable resource for the young ones and indeed an ego ideal for the youngsters". (Anikweze, 1995).

Teacher Education Institutions

Now is the time to pay attention to entry qualification of the candidates. Those seeking admission into any teacher education institution must have at least five credits including English and Mathematics. It will put a stop to teaching being for practitioners who could never qualify for anything else. We strongly recommend the stopping of Pre-NCE programme because their lecturers are too busy and over-worked to do justice to the programme. Where it must continue, it should have its own separate staff specifically, employed to teach it. All students admitted into Colleges of Education must do Primary Education studies. It is only by so doing will they learn primary methods and thus be equipped for primary school teaching.

To stop the exodus of seasoned academics to the universities all tertiary institutions staff should have the same salary structure, the same conditions of service and they should all be given research grants. Deserving lecturers in Colleges of Education should rise to professional rank.

Teacher Education must be re-organized so that it should respond to the realities of the present century. Therefore, teacher education institutions should be well staffed and equipped. National Commission of Colleges of Education (NCCE) should not wait till the accreditation year to monitor learning facilities and standards. It should have a supervisory group who has to move round to see to standards, equipment and so on. This is necessary because teacher education programme more than anything else influences the nation's future.

Examination malpractice is seen as the worst misfortune that has befallen OUT CQUC3.Tional system. Unfortunately, lecturers are indicted for it. We suggest the immediate dismissal of any lecturer involved in examination malpractice.

Federal and State Governments

Federal and State Governments should turn a new leaf and show concern and respect for primary education. They should knock down the dilapidating buildings of the past decades and replace them with modern buildings conducive for teaching and learning in the present jet age. All the facilities necessary for achieving those aims outlined in our national policies for education should be provided. The governments should make it possible for them to go to remote villages and riverine areas. It is a common complaint that often, because the government controls schools and so the threat of closing them down is no longer there, it does not implement the recommendations of the supervisors and inspectors (Arinze, 1998). The practice should stop immediately if our primary schools are to achieve the expected goals of quality education.

Change in Societal Values

Our societal values must be reprioritized and this is where the nation has Herculean task. Our traditional values of honesty, hard work, dignity of labour, respect for elders and hatred for evil must be revived and practised at all levels, home, school, workplace and the church. While the home and the school could inculcate these values in the children through the stories selected for their reading, the media especially, the television should focus on films with the above values. Foreign films and aggressive films should be minimized. They can also use cartoons, jingles etc to promote desirable values. Parents and adults should put less emphasis on material gains and live exemplary lives. If they can do this, the younger ones will surely imitate them. It is time the Federal Government thought seriously over handing primary schools the back to the mission so that they can start early to instill the correct behaviour into these children.

Recommendations

1. Primary school teachers in order to cope with the ever-changing trends in modern education should up-date their knowledge regularly during the holidays either through refresher courses or through part-time studies in universities.
2. Only students who have five credits (English and Mathematics inclusive) should be admitted into Teacher Education Institutions and all of them must do Primary Education courses.

V. Nonyelum Eiike (Mrs.)

3. Brain drain of seasoned lecturers from Colleges of Education to places of greener pastures must be checked through giving them the same treatment as their counter-parts in the universities.
4. Both Federal and State Governments should provide the primary schools and the teacher institutions all that they need to meet the demands of the national policy on education.

Conclusion

There is a general complaint over poor quality education in our primary schools. Certain factors are responsible for this, prominent among them are poorly qualified non-dedicated teachers, admission of very weak students into teacher institutions, brain-drain of seasoned teacher educators, lack of facilities in both teacher institutions and primary schools and wrong societal values. Suggestions were offered for improvement. Something has to be done to save our primary education. Nigeria must be prepared for challenges ahead and the starting point is of course the child, that is, the primary school.

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