

FUNCTIONAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: POLICY TO CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Education has been aptly described as a potent kit for both individual and societal development. For this purpose, it has been employed on a wide scale for growth, development, progress and prosperity by individuals and nations alike. Education is being dispensed at various levels and in different forms, and individuals (people) are its greatest consumers. To streamline activities and services in the education sector, there is the felt need to articulate a policy to conform with the needs and aspiration of the people and the Nigerian nation with the ultimate aim of attaining the achievement of the national goals. Thus, the National Policy of Education, which is in its 6th revised edition, has been formulated. One major section of this policy is primary education, whose nomenclature suggests that it is the foundation of the entire system of education. To provide a solid base for this gigantic structure, it has, therefore become incumbent upon operators in both public and private sectors to effectively translate the policy to reality in or through the classrooms. To facilitate this, some imperatives for functional primary education have been identified. Realities on ground in the primary education sector were described and the way forward was charted. Among others, it was recommended that colleges of primary education be established at the Federal and State levels, and the formulation of an integrated policy on prim of education.

Keyword: Educational policy, classroom, sustainability functional primary education and values

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the potency of education in the transformation of individuals and society at large, it has become necessary to formulate a policy for this subsector of the economy. There are different forms of education (formal, informal and non formal) as there also exist different levels of education (early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary). These forms and levels of education affect people of all ages, and because the people are the greatest asset of any nation, there arises the need to articulate a comprehensive package of what the purpose and objectives of education should be as well as duties and responsibilities of stakeholders in the industry.

Thus, one major fall out of the 1969 National Curriculum Conference was the formulation

of the country's educational goals in terms of their relevance to the needs of the individual and the Nigerian Society, in tandem with the realities within and around the country. Consequently, the first edition of the National Policy on Education was published in 1977. Subsequently, the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth editions came into being in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2009 and 2013 respectively. In the National Policy on Education, all the tiers of education are provided for among other items. Of all these levels, the one that appears significant and perhaps draws more attention is primary education. The significance and attention could be attributed to the basic fact that it lays the foundation for the entire system of education, hence, the need to make it

sustainable to support the superstructure (education). This paper shall be presented under the following subheadings or units:

- Education policy
- Primary education and its objectives
- Imperatives for functional primary education
- Realities on ground in the primary education sector
- Conclusion
- The way forward (recommendations)

EDUCATION POLICY (WHAT IS?)

This is a document stating the intent, purpose and principles made by government in the area of education. It can, therefore, be defined as statement of government's intentions and means of achieving the national goals using education as an instrument (FRN, 2004). Education policy can be described as principles made by government in the area of education and ways of using such to attain the achievement of its national objectives. Inherent in the concept of education policy are determination of objectives (national), methodologies for attainment of such objectives and the adaptation of existing relevant policies to assuage national challenges that government may encounter (Osokoya, 2011). In a nutshell, education policy is government's schedule or plan of action specifying how its values, hopes, yearnings and aspirations would be realized using education as a working tool.

Education policy could also refer to the collection of both overt and covert rules and regulations that govern the conduct and behaviour of stakeholders in the education enterprise. From the foregoing, therefore, it could be deduced that education policy has considerable impact on shaping what happens on a daily basis in the educational institutions, and the experiences of people

who study and work in them (Bell and Stevenson, 2006).

The nature of the entire formal schooling process is largely organized and controlled by the government. Hence, how education is financed, the goals it seeks to attain and evaluation of such goals, instructional resources to be used, the evaluation processes and procedures as well as human resources to work in the schools are all determined by government. These make the education policy a political document (Apple, 2003). Therefore, a greater political will is required to translate it to practice for achievement of set goals.

PRIMARY EDUCATION AND ITS OBJECTIVES

Primary education is considered the building blocks of a child's educational future. This is particularly true because children are given instruction in the rudimentary knowledge in different school subjects at this level of education. It, therefore, provides the basis for the progressive learning of the child. Education received by children at the first level of formal education is known as primary education. Primary education is:

Education given in institutions for children aged 6 to 11 plus. Since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary level is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. The duration shall be six years (FRN, 2004: 14).

Implicit in the above definition is that from six years of age the child has commenced the development of some cognitive, physical, emotional and social capabilities to cope with learning the basic concepts, skills, principles, knowledge, attitude and values that can induce desirable behaviour change.

The National Policy on Education, without any form of ambiguity declares primary

education as the foundation of the entire superstructure known as education. There arises the need, therefore, to solidify this foundation to enable it sustain the entire system of education. By putting its duration at six years, it is clear that by the attainment of eleven to twelve years, the child would have developed and acquired considerable capabilities to function in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor and psychosocial domains of learning. The implication of this is that the child would be transiting to a higher form of learning at the secondary education level with ease. In Nigeria, primary education is a major component of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme. This component is divided into two equal halves of three years each. The first three years constitute the junior primary (i.e. primary classes 1 – 3), and the last three years account for the senior primary (i.e. primary classes 4 – 6). To ensure a sustainable primary education, the policy emphatically states that memorization and regurgitation of facts be minimized, and instead, active learning strategies that involve the encouragement of practical, exploratory and experimental procedures be employed by teachers at this level of education. Okujagu (2008) opined that the application of these strategies will reinforce and strengthen the foundation of the entire education system of sustain the next higher levels, thereby preventing system collapse.

OBJECTIVES OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

The tasks, functions and/or expectations which the primary schools are expected and determined to accomplish are outlined as follows. To:

- (a) inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;
- (b) lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;

- (c) give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in the contribution to the life of the society;
- (d) mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;
- (e) develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
- (f) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity;
- (g) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality (FRN, 2004: 14).

One major matter arising from the above objectives is that being institutional objectives, they are stated in broad or general terms. Hence, the attainment of these objectives can only be achieved in the classroom through the ability of individuals (teachers) who have been trained to acquire the knowledge, skills, aptitude, techniques and attitudes necessary to translate these general objectives into various specific and achievable kinds.

Again, the objectives are comprehensive, for they cover the three domains of learning – cognitive, affective and psychomotor. This means that instructional procedure and activities, and the use of instructional methods and materials and resources must be consistent with the stated objectives.

Furthermore, the objectives reveal that a variety of curricular and co-curricular activities will be required to attain their achievement. In this regard, the primary school curriculum has been discriminated into various curriculum offerings as contained in the 9 year basic education curriculum currently in use across the country.

Lastly, pursuant to the achievement of the objectives of primary education, teachers have the responsibility of implementing the policy in the classroom. It therefore becomes imperative that the process of training and retraining of teachers for and teachers in primary schools should be consistent with the provisions of the policy concerning primary education.

IMPERATIVES FOR FUNCTIONAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

The nature of primary education is such that it must be a grooming ground or 'nursery' for human resources development. Hence, certain measures must be put in place to enable it lay a solid and sustainable foundation for the entire system of education of any country. These variables that cannot be ignored due to their importance in the primary education project include:

ACCESS AND EQUITY

Children being the major recipients of primary education are the primary consumers of the industry. In other words, if children are not presented or made available for primary education, the industry will be frustrated to the point of closure. It, therefore, has become imperative that all children of school age be mobilized for primary education by stakeholders, especially parents ensure that their children or wards attend and complete primary education or face a penalty of five thousand (₦5,000.00) Naira or two (2) months imprisonment or both.

Deepening access to primary education could also mean creating physical access (establishment and equipment of more schools) especially in the local, remote and hard-to-reach areas, economic access (empowering parents to alleviate poverty) and quality access (curriculum, teacher and instructional materials issues).

Equity is related to access in that it measures the success or failure of primary education delivery. It is viewed in terms of providing equal educational opportunities for children of school age irrespective of gender, location, perceived or real physical attributes, or creed. Thus, parents, guardians and other managers of children are not expected to discriminate between school age children presented for primary education. The tendency is to favour a particular gender against the other during enrolment for some traditional flimsy excuses and reasons.

TEACHER FACTOR IN THE CLASSROOM

The teacher in the primary classroom is critical to successful and meaningful learning of the children. Children from different homes, social, economic and cultural backgrounds congregate in the classroom, far away from their respective homes. It will take an effective and conscientious teacher to cause learning and social interaction to thrive in the classroom, given the individual differences that exist among the children.

Primary education is a sensitive level of education, and so teacher at that level should be such that could combine their professional ethics, skills and knowledge with the love and desire to work with children. These they develop naturally and acquire better through training, hence, teacher training remains very critical to successful learning at the officers at any educational system should be competent in the use of necessary resources available in schools for increased productivity.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION/EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY SKILLS

Pursuant to creating an enabling environment for the child to strive and develop to the fullest in terms of his potential, early childhood education has become imperative. This comes at the heels

of some research findings watch reveal that care and support for children in terms of good health, nutrition and psycho-social care and protection are crucial in the formation and development of intelligence, social behaviour and personality. Examples include the works of Johann Pestalozzi, Frederick Froebel, Robert Owen, Maria Montessori, Grace Own and the Macmillan sisters, among others (Ebong, 1996).

Early childhood education which aims at ensuring positive outcomes for the child in terms of cognitive achievement, care and development involves teaching or grooming young children to acquire basic knowledge, skills and abilities that will enable them to progress smoothly to primary school and other levels of schooling, and Nigeria has decided to place premium on this because the development of a nation, to a large extent, depends on the development and capabilities of human beings residual in the country (NERDC (n.d), Akinola, 2004 and Okujagu, 2013).

CLASSROOM INFRASTRUCTURE

The classroom remains the primary 'factory' in the education industry. In the classroom knowledge, skills, attitude and values are produced and acquired by learners. Therefore to engender effective and meaningful learning, the classroom must be friendly, congenial and conducive for teaching and learning to thrive. These conditions can only be achieved if and when the needed infrastructure in the classroom are provided, accessed and optimally utilized. The classroom infrastructure in question here include, teacher's table and chair, seats and desks for pupils, bookshelves, lockers, boards, doors, windows and fans among others. Provision of these items will induce some measure of comfort for both teachers and pupils, during the teaching and learning process which will

in turn result in improved academic gains and achievement, thereby equipping children with values and skills that would enable them key into globalization and functionality in different contexts and situations (Obi and Okeke, 2013).

SUSTAINABLE QUALITY ASSURANCE

Being the foundation level of the entire system of education, primary education needs to be dispensed in a manner that assures sustainable quality. Assurance of quality must be sustainable in terms of curricula activities, instructional methods and materials as well as in evaluation procedures, technique and tools in primary education system that will stand the test of time and space. Sustainable quality assurance in primary education, therefore, will mean exposure to acquisition of modern and effective methods and materials for teaching and learning, classroom management techniques, and evaluation procedures as well as other innovations that are in line with best practices in education. In this way, the systematic implementation of the planned curricula and co-curricular activities at the primary level of education will meet the requirement to engender effective, meaningful and successful teaching and learning that can lay a solid foundation for subsequent higher levels of education.

FUNCTIONAL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING PROGRAMME

Primary education is crucial to educational development. This is because children are in their formative years where they are still building values and concepts of life. The need, therefore, arises to provide children with appropriate models through functional guidance and counseling services which will guide them into desirable behaviour and good habit formation (Nwachukwu, 2009). Initial separation from parents and being

introduced to a new environment made up of people with diverse idiosyncrasies is usually traumatic for the child, and the way and manner the trauma is treated will determine the child's like or dislike for schooling. It is important, therefore, that adequate attention is paid to the emotional adjustment of the child to enhance his cognitive development, personality and career prospects. The ultimate aim of guidance and counseling in primary schools is to guide, direct, assist or motivate children to assume responsibility for their learning and out of school/classroom experiences.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS ISSUES

Just like other levels of formal education, primary education is dispensed via a curriculum. The curriculum is usually a reflection of the learners' psychology, societal needs and demands, and inputs from subject matter experts and specialists. To attain the achievement of set objectives in primary education, the curriculum is further discriminated into different subject offerings. For effective implementation of the curriculum, instructional materials have been designed and developed in each of the curriculum offerings, and often times with related supplementary materials. It is these instructional and supplementary materials that are used to facilitate teaching and learning in the classroom, often dominated by children. These materials must reflect the child in all ramifications for him to be able to 'consume' them without any form of friction and reservations. So the more authentic, current, challenging, and accessible the curriculum and its instructional materials, the more viable and functional primary education will be in achieving its set objectives.

REALITIES ON GROUND IN THE PRIMARY EDUCATION SECTOR

Nigeria has signed some conventions, protocols and instruments at the local and international levels aimed at promoting the achievement of functional basic education. The Universal Basic Education (UBE), the 7 point agenda, the Vision 20:2020 of the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Transformation agenda, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Addis Ababa Conference of 1961 and the 1990 Jomtien Declaration and Framework of Action on Education for All (EFA), as well as the United Nations Human Rights Acts of 1948 are cases in point (Okujagu, 2013 and Maduewesi, 2005). Unfortunately, access has remained a huge challenge to functional primary education in the country. For example FME (2009) reported that out of the expected enrolment figure of 34.92 million children in the primary schools, only 24.42 million are actually registered leaving a shortfall of 10.5 million.

The issue of equity in terms of providing equal educational opportunity to all children of school age irrespective of gender, location and physical attributes is a major challenge for a wholesome primary education. Equity broadens access as it is viewed as a measure to enhance inclusiveness in education. By this measure, children from indigent homes, those with physical disabilities, children living with HIV/AIDS and those whose parents are infected by the disease, orphans and vulnerable children, and even those displaced or dislocated by war or other natural disasters, are made to have access to quality education, so far they are of school age. Unfortunately, the realities on ground in terms of access and equity are a gloomy picture. It is often reported that about 10.6 million children of school age are out of school in Nigeria. The reasons may not be unconnected with the low literacy level of parents as well as ignorance and poverty. Poverty appears a bigger challenge as

children are often withdrawn by parents and sent out to hawk, for fishing and farming during school hours, all with the intention to make ends meet. A more deplorable condition is unveiling following the Boko Haram insurgency menace where schools have become targets and students are not only killed in their numbers but also abducted to unknown destinations by the insurgents. This worrisome situation has made parents to withdraw their children from schools coupled with Federal Government decision to close the schools in such crises prone areas. This crime against humanity is in addition to burning and destruction of school buildings and classroom facilities. These actions further narrower access and equity to education.

Teacher factor in the primary classrooms as it is currently portends a gloomy future for primary education. This has become particularly worrisome against the background of the fact that no sustainable system of education may rise above the quality of its teachers (FRN, 2004). The teacher factor in Nigeria is plagued by a myriad of challenges because the quantity and quality of teachers produced in the country over the years fell short of national expectation and needs, and these tend to frustrate the attainment of set goals of primary education. To improve teacher factor in the classrooms, therefore, training and retraining of primary school teachers must be of top priority.

Udosen, Oko and Ekanem (2011) noted that in as much as child bearing will not stop, there will also be no end for the education of these children, hence, adequate number of qualified primary school teachers is required to teach the children to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them exhibit desirable behaviour capable of

facilitating smooth transmission to higher levels of formal education.

In Nigeria today, early childhood education appears boosted as against three decades ago. Undoubtedly, this is as a result of immeasurable values accruable from it. In addition to encouraging participation by the private sector, government has also made Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) a major component of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme. By this arrangement, all public primary schools in the country are to establish ECCE centres. However, the extent of successful compliance to this directive remains in doubt. This is not unconnected with a chain of challenges plaguing the UBE and, indeed, the entire system of education. These challenges according to Udosen, Oko and Ekanem (2011) range from funding issues across quality down to discipline and values. Other issues in the way of ECCE are that many operators of these centres such as voluntary organizations, private individuals and even communities hardly adhere fully to government prescribed directives, requirements and regulation. It is a common feature to see all manner of 'Montessori' being operated from substandard buildings and environment. These 'Montessori' centres which fall short in curriculum issues and charge exorbitant fees, also utilize the poorest quality of teachers in the name of caregivers. In addition to the above, wives of governors of some states in Nigeria have converted this all important wholesome idea of care, support and education for the child into their 'pet' projects. These 'pet' projects are often used to siphon tax payers money for political purposes.

Availability of classroom infrastructure as noted earlier provides a comfortable, congenial and friendly environment and atmosphere that induces learning. FME

(2006) puts available classrooms in formal education as at 2006 at 497,811 with a shortfall of 1,152,412. It is sad to note that between 2006 and now, not much has been achieved in the provision of classroom blocks in primary schools across the country. Most of these classrooms, where found, are in a state of disrepair and dilapidation, and because of these the facilities that would accompany a typical classroom are not available. Inadequate or lack of classroom infrastructure does not bring about the required enablement for pupils and teachers to be involved in purposeful teaching and learning, as this causes discomfort for them in their ability to manage and control the class during the teaching and learning process. Therefore, all classroom infrastructure need to be provided for effective curriculum implementation and successful instructional delivery in the primary schools as with other levels of formal education (Okujagu & Adox-Okujagu, 2011; Okujagu, 2012).

The need for a sustainable quality assurance in primary education cannot be overemphasized. Quality assurance puts and allows all the components of the system to be on course and in good working conditions. However, what is on ground in Nigeria primary schools seems to be on the contrary. Okujagu (2012) listed weak capacity of quality assurance agents, low learning outcomes, lack of standardized and uniform quality assurance tools and reporting mechanisms, lack of adequately qualified primary school teachers; lack of fund and attitude of quality assurance agents as the bane of quality assurance in primary schools. These concerns are also not significantly different from the eight components of quality standard as enshrined in the National Educational Quality Assurance Policy: learner achievement and standards; learners welfare and

participation; care, guidance and support; leadership and management; school community relationship; learning environment; teaching and learning; and curriculum and other activities (Alaba, 2010). In all of these, little or no significant impact has been felt in the processes of quality assurance in primary schools across the country as there appears to be more to be done in this direction.

Guidance and counseling services in primary schools have been treated with utmost levity. Nwachuku (2009) asserted that almost all primary schools, in both the public and private sectors, have no offices for the school guidance counselor, nor have established school guidance counseling services managed by a trained counselor. A functional guidance and counseling programme is very essential in primary education because it is the formative stage of individuals. This stage entails grooming, nurturing, correction, motivation, assistance and direction, among others, and it is only a good guidance and counseling system that can guarantee the facilitation of these processes. The situation on ground across the country is that trained guidance counselors and their services are nonexistent in public primary schools, save for some highbrow private primary schools where it is seen as an alien culture than a component of the school system. Teachers in primary schools who are by themselves supposed to offer guidance and counseling services to pupils in their classrooms hardly ever remember this role, because they are overwhelmed by teaching a variety of subjects to their pupils. Therefore, guidance and counseling services have remained elusive in primary schools.

Curriculum and instructional materials in primary are crucial to learning. To ensure a functional UBE scheme, politics should be

removed from it. Curriculum is the livewire of formal education system, and so its implementation is critical to set goal achievement. As curriculum implementers, teachers need to be exposed to capacity building exercises and 'software update' on a regular basis, without any form of political undertone whatsoever. Training and retraining of teachers appear to be a privilege than a convention. It is done in a noisy manner to attract accolade from the public and not all teachers benefit from it at the same time. Meaning that some teachers will be ahead of their folks in the same system. This is capable of negative impact on teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

The article has aptly reviewed the importance of education and the place of education policy in national development. It was stated that education policy reflects the needs and challenges of individuals and society and how best to satisfy them, hence a greater political will is required to implement the education policy in order to attain the achievement of set goals. Primary education is identified as the most sensitive and crucial stratum of the education system, hence its processes need to be quality assured. In this direction, the listed imperatives of a functional primary education must be satisfied in order to move the 'primary education project' to the next level. To realize this, the following way forward is suggested by way of recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To deepen and expand access and equity in primary education, all major stakeholders in primary education need to be sensitized on the need to make their children/wards available for enrolment into primary schools, irrespective of gender, physical isolation, creed and vulnerability. The sensitization should further stress the need and values of formal education for better understanding by stakeholders.
- Considering the importance and role of the teacher in the teaching –learning process, it would be on track that colleges of primary education be established at both the federal and state levels to contain the ethics, skills and knowledge required by the primary school teacher to discharge his professional duties and responsibilities. This has come on the heels of the fact that a variety of subjects are taught in primary schools by a single teacher in the name of classroom teacher. The teacher require the dexterity to delivery instruction in different subject matters, and the knowledge, skills, ethics and values, provided in a faculty of education or department of primary education or early childhood education of a regular university or college of education is not enough to create meaningful impacts needed in all the primary school subject offerings. This arrangement will also boost the capabilities of teachers in becoming specialist in their areas of interest.
- Government should not only make pronouncements on early childhood care, development and education, but should amply demonstrate the will and commitment to such issues. This demonstration will serve to motivate voluntary agencies and other private proprietors to bring about intensive human capital development.
- Government and other stakeholders in primary education should synergize with well-meaning development partners to provide classroom infrastructure in primary schools. Elders and leaders of crises and terror prone communities

should dialogue with the aggrieved insurgents for peace to reign so that students/pupils and infrastructure in educational institutions will no longer be targeted for destruction.

- Quality assurance processes in primary education should be given priority attention. This will include developing and boosting the capacity of assurance agents/officers to be more dutiful, evolving sustainable processes and procedures for quality assurance, revision of quality assurance tools as well as regular update of teachers' capacity. These inputs, with full commitment to them, will bring about standards that will ensure that primary education attains its set goals.
- Regular guidance and counseling services should be made a major component of the primary schools system. Schools must have offices for trained guidance counselors. The capacity of counselors must also be built from time to time, to cope with the exigencies of dealing with children. Counselors should concentrate on their primary assignment, than teaching.
- In addition to regular revision of curriculum and related instructional materials, teachers must be trained on a regular basis to understand the curriculum and their role in implementing it. This should be without any form of ambiguity, because a misconception or misunderstanding of the curriculum by teachers can throw the entire system into chaos.
- Considering the critical nature of growth and development in children, agencies/institutions relevant to the holistic nurturing of the primary school child should convene interventions that would lead to the formulation of an

integrated national policy on primary education.

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