

IMPROVING THE STANDARD AND QUALITY OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *Globally, education is one of the veritable and potent instruments for change and transformation in the socio-political, scientific and technological spheres of every nation. The primary level of education, though paradoxically neglected in Nigeria is a base and/or foundation of the entire educational system. This is why the importance of functional and pragmatic primary education curriculum is needed to drive home the national development agenda. This paper advocated that the functionality of primary education is what can make education at higher levels a potent instrument for national development. To drive home the objectives of this paper, focus was placed on what is primary education; primary education as well as what national development entails. With more emphasis, emerging challenges of Nigerian primary education like; lack of political commitment, challenges of poor infrastructural facilities, challenges of competent teachers and poor funding were identified. Lastly entrepreneurship education and value education were advocated as possible measures for responding to the challenges of primary education in Nigeria. Summary and suggestions were made.*

KEYWORDS: Primary education, National development, Improving standard and quality

INTRODUCTION

Education is very basic to national development so no nation can afford to toil with it. Hence, the foundation of every great nation is said to be the education of its citizens. The federal government in recognition of this important role of education as a tool for the development of the individual, the society and the nation, adopted education in the National Policy on Education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria FRN 2012). Nigeria as a nation requires adequate human and material resources to improve its social organization preserves the culture, enhance economic development and reform the political structure. Therefore, education is seen as a prerequisite for quality man power development and creation of wealth, a sure path to success in life and service to humanity.

There is no gainsaying the fact that education is very vital to the pace of social, political and economic development of any nation. Education is a key investment in any nation with enormous social and economic benefits accruing from it. This explains why one of the national education goals is the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competences as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society (FRN 2012).

Qualitatively, the type of education being imparted to majority of the schools and college children is ill-suited to the development need of Nigerians, were the appropriate education approach is yet to be given attention. To affirm this, Oloruntoyin (2011) posits that at present,

the quality of education offered to children in primary schools in Nigeria is below the required standard. This has gross adverse effect on quantitative and qualitative human capital development.

With the dependency of individual, family, community and the nation on education for national development, the fundamental place of primary education cannot be overemphasized. FRN (2012) recognizing this role, writes; since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary level of education is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. The primary education is therefore a reservoir of knowledge and a citadel of learning basic skills for national development.

Despite its contribution, the leaders of Nigeria have not given education and the primary education in particular attention it deserves. This is one of the reasons for the nation underdevelopment. Though Nigeria is replete with brilliant impeccable and well written policies, vision and reform agenda, eventually, there was no actualization and no regrets for the failure. Hence, for Nigeria to attain the goals of national development agenda, functional primary education has to be the paramount focus because is the foundation of the entire system. Therefore, the realization of transformation agenda is hinged on making the primary education system viable and the education acquired functional.

What is primary education?

Primary education as referred to in the National Policy on Education (NPE) is the education given in institutions for children aged 6-11 plus (FRN 2012). It is the first stage and compulsory education. Primary education is preceded by pre-school or nursery education and followed by secondary education. The primary education is the first six years of the nine years of basic education using the Universal Basic Education (UBE) standard. This stage of education is often addressed as elementary education.

In most countries of the world, primary education is compulsory for children to receive although it is permissible for parents to provide it. Children are usually placed in classes with a teacher who will be primarily responsible for their education and welfare for that year. This teacher may be assisted to varying degrees by specialist teachers in certain subject area. Today, there are about 48,242 primary schools with 16,796,078 students but with limited and incompetent teachers in Nigeria (Okam 2012). The vision statement of Universal Basic Education that encompasses primary education states that the end of nine years of continuous education, every child should acquire appropriate and relevant skills and values and be employable in order to contribute his or her quota to National Development

Primary Education and National Development in Nigeria

According to Edinyang, Ubi and Adalikwu (2012), one of the important aims of education is to foster the full development of an individual to enable full contribution to the well-being of the society. In an ideal sense, education is an ultimate value and hence, through the provision of social service, it is an agent of change (Ogunwuyi 2010). It is the responsibility of the educational system of any nation to bring to the light the transformation of the economic, political, scientific and technological recognition. The place of primary education is very paramount because it is the foundation of adults' contribution to developmental processes. In other words, the basic education makes a child a better adult.

The primary education is to the educational system and is to the nation what the mind is to the body. A faulty primary education which is the foundation of the entire education system can thwart the attainment of the intended outcome of the system. The objectives of primary education as deduced from Nigerian national education aims and objectives read thus;

- i) inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;
- ii) lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- iii) give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- iv) mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;
- v) develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
- vi) giving 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;
- vii) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and the craft of the locality (FRN 2012).

These objectives made the primary education the immediate concern of all and sundry as it become obviously the foundation on which to build the future of Nigerian nation. It can therefore be affirmed that the aims and objectives of the primary education is no longer just the acquisition of the ability to read, write and numeracy as it were in the colonial era but had moved to a more complex skills acquisition that will enable a primary school leaver to be an independent member of the society (Osuji and Alugbuo 2003). According to Bagudo (2006), the Nigerian schools are always termed as a place of learning functional skills, receiving ideal information, to act rationally to the expectation of the broader society. Writing on the primacy of early education of the child, Oyekan (2000) holds that it behooves us to ensure that children are adequately prepared today so that they may find suitable answers to meet the needs and challenges of tomorrow. The primary education is therefore a child of necessity for the transformation of any society

However, the increasing threat to the optimization of educational results in Nigeria today due to poor quality of basic education leavers is a matter that requires concerted efforts of all stakeholders in the education sub-sector for improvement. These weaknesses necessitated the low quality of graduates from all levels of Nigerian educational system. This has consequently impeded national development and the transformation agenda of different administrations. The school system which ought to be factory for human engineering had failed this nation and the failure in human development had led to the failure in material development need of the country.

What national development entails

One needs to understand that the theme of national development agenda is that Nigeria is now in the track competitiveness- that is competing with the rest of the world in the proper delivery of goods and services to mankind. It entails economic rebirth, educational transformation, moral orientation, and agricultural regeneration as well as scientific and technological revolution. Okam (2012) puts it thus; it means that there will be at least 20

Nigeria companies and universities competing favourably in delivery of quality goods and efficient services with the first 20 economies in the world. Textile industries, Nigerian Airlines, shipping lines, Automobile companies, reliable banking companies, oil and gas companies among others need to be overhauled. The policies and processes of achieving these must be conceived and implemented via a sincere and purposeful leadership produced by an honest and conscientious political class through a free, fair and just democratic process and passionately supported by an enlightened and politically conscious citizenry.

Emerging challenges of Nigerian primary education and implication on national development

Lack of Political Commitment

The poor socioeconomic condition in Nigeria and the inability of the leaders to create conditions necessary for higher national development after 14 years of consistent civil rule or democracy, should be a concern to any person who cares about Nigeria. Owing to the nature of primary education and the school system in general, governments give less concern to issues of funding, provision of infrastructure and supply of qualified and experienced teachers. Given the obvious importance of teachers, problems in supporting newly qualified teachers and a lack of career development opportunities in school settings often combine to make teachers' effectiveness difficult.

The working conditions of primary school teachers in Nigeria is in pitiable condition that if not addressed can impede teachers' effectiveness. UNESCO (2009) submits that if we are to put human development at the heart of socio-economic strategies, the advancement and the working conditions of teachers must be addressed. Salaries are not regularly paid and industrial actions have become continuous and reoccurring rituals in Nigerian public service.

Challenges of poor infrastructural facilities

Many primary schools both in the rural and urban cities are crumbling because of lack of maintenance. The degree of infrastructural decay in Nigerian primary schools is an eyesore that should give government sleepless night. Provocatively, Oloruntoyin (2011) stressed that many of the buildings were erected in the late 1950s and early 1960s with mud blocks. Today they are not only a health hazard but also potential death traps. In fact, in many areas, classes are being held in the open during the dry season and when the raining season sets in children are crowded into the few available ramshackle buildings. For any curriculum to be maximally implemented to meet the vision 2020 or the national transformation agenda, infrastructural facilities such as classroom, laboratories, seats and libraries among others must be put in place. The absence of these infrastructures in most cases has seriously constrained the teaching and learning objectives of the curriculum (Enu, Omoogun and Okeme 2009).

Challenges of competent teachers

At the lower and middle levels of primary education, there are reported cases such as Oloruntoyin (2011) of increases in the rate of absentee and ineffective teachers in schools. The conditions in primary schools are particularly peculiar especially when there are lesser teachers to the number of classes that the teacher has to teach. In most cases teachers that are overloaded with the task of teaching the students are not even qualified to teach.

Also monitoring teachers presents additional difficulties to educational managers. This is crucial in order to address teacher absenteeism. It has been found that getting teachers to come to work is a major barrier to improving education outcomes. Recruiting, training, and supporting competent teachers to provide quality learning can be particularly challenging. The ideal primary school teacher, according to Brown (2003) is certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, can teach students with a wide range of abilities in the same classroom, is prepared to supervise extracurricular activities, and can adjust to the community. As a result, teachers must constantly upgrade their skills through pre-service and in-service training programmes. However, most teachers in Nigerian primary schools today are those without the knowledge of the subject matter and pedagogical skills neither are there ready for in-service training. Unlike secondary schools where teachers teach base on their area of specialization, primary school teachers teach all round. These are not the 21st century teachers as well as instructional organization needed to drive home the national education goals for national development and transformation.

Funding

A major challenge facing the primary education and implementation of the curriculum at this level is funding in the mist of rising demands and cost of education. To address this worsening problem, governments at the local, state and national levels must shoulder higher responsibility for boosting primary education by allocating more funds to the sector.

Adedeji, Okemakinde, and SSempebwa, (2008) affirm that finance is one of the problems confronting education sector owing to a drastic reduction in both the actual and proportion of government fund allocated to the education sector, despite the UNESCO's recommendations of allocation of 26% of a nation's national income to the sector. Contrary to this recommendation, Nigeria in the past four years allotted just 6.4%, 7.5%, 8.4% and 8.7% of her annual budgets to education in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 in that order (Ladan 2012). The source reiterated that the low level of fiscal allocation to the sector which is below the UNESCO's threshold of 26% of the total budget certainly affects the implementation of government policy on education in the country and in particular the Universal Basic Education since its inception. The proportion of funding in the primary educational investment should rise and governments should strive to provide children of poor rural families with access to free textbooks and exemption from miscellaneous expenses.

Responding to the challenges of primary education

Nigeria primary school climate is facing challenges of low operational quality and absence of required facilities to cater for teacher and students, which features rampant examination malpractices, lack of parental commitment to school activities, high rate of bully, dominant acts of indiscipline, inbuilt culture of incompetency and a general hopelessness leading to students failure, truancy and dropout. For education to respond to the developmental needs of this nation experimenting democracy, primary education curriculum must be repackaged to reflect;

Entrepreneurship Education

The term entrepreneurship is a derivative of the French word "entrepreneur" meaning a person who undertakes the development of a new enterprise or a new venture at some risks. On the other hand, entrepreneurship education according to Kuratko (2003) is the education

that embraces skill building programs, creative thinking product development and market, negotiation, leadership training and wealth generation. Similarly, Ubah (2012) conceived entrepreneurship education as a formal training to acquire knowledge, skill and attitude which are direct human and material resources towards business objectives for self-reliance. Entrepreneurship education is designed to make individuals functional and responsive to their personal and national life or aspiration.

This paper is a call for the introduction (proper implementation) of entrepreneurship education in primary education. It is envisaged that when properly implemented in Nigerian primary schools, in addition to helping tomorrow's adults to establish their own small scale business or company, it will also equip them with the knowledge of how entrepreneurial firms operate. Speaking on its relevance, Ubah (2012) states that recipients of entrepreneurship education will also learn the skills that are necessary for various and changing challenges they face in their life time.

The dwindling economic situation and the resultant massive unemployment of youth and adults, the eroded moral fabric and indigenous science and technology, indicate that there is a need for a free and self reliance education for children of school age. This self reliance education (Entrepreneurship education) has a major role to play in Nigeria's march towards realizing the mission transformation agenda.

It is worthy to note here that the Federal government recognition of entrepreneurship education is laudable. It directed all institution of higher learning in Nigeria to introduce the study of entrepreneurship as a compulsory course for all students, irrespective of their discipline with effect as far back to 2007/2008 academic session. This paper is advocating that acquisition of skills of this magnitude should come early enough in the child's life as to form the value of one's life.

Value Education

Values education involves "educating for character" and for good "moral values." It is the teaching of respect and responsibility (and other values) to the citizens for good character development and for the health of the nation. As Thomas Lickona pointed out in 'Educating for Character' "respect and responsibility are the two foundational moral values" that a society should teach its citizens (Dike 2008). Other values are honesty, fairness, tolerance, prudence, self-discipline, helpfulness, compassion, cooperation, courage (the Virtues of Aristotle) and other democratic values. However, rule of law, equality of opportunity, due process, representative government, checks and balances and democratic decision-making are "procedural values" that define democracy. All these would enable the people to create a viable humane society and to act "respectfully and responsibly." Thus taking responsibility for the things we do wrong as well as the things we do right is the way to move the society forward.

The increasing moral problems in Nigeria (corruption, greed, dishonesty, violent crime, political killings, drugs (peddling and use) and other destructive behaviors, call for 'values education' in the society. Presently, corruption drives and shapes social values in Nigeria, and for some individuals, the quest for 'easy money' is a justification for breaking the laws of the land and distorting policies directed toward national development. Consequently, unnecessary display of ill-acquired wealth threatens Nigeria and its democratic political

process. When the leaders and the people think of public service in instrumental way, accountability declines, and national development is adversely affected.

Nevertheless, morality would not be important to the young ones if it does not form the basis for their lives. Experts in 'moral education' believe that 'moral development' "promotes critical thinking and moral reasoning", which positively impacts national development. As noted earlier, because of greed, selfishness, dishonesty and immorality and lack of respect for the society, elections are often rigged in Nigeria, political opponents assassinated, and public schools are left to rot away. This has over the years become threat to Nigerian national development agenda.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTION

There is no doubt that Nigeria's quest for and policies intended to fuel national development had not yielded much as expected across every sector of the Nigerian economy. The educational system which ought to be an instrument for national transformation has failed in its mission as human engineering factory, to inculcate appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society. A united, strong and self-reliance nation, a great and dynamic economy among others are still dreams to come many years after independence.

National transformation cannot be achieved in a nation full of unending paradoxes of strike actions, total decay of educational facilities, lack of teachers' commitment, inadequate funding of education and lack of political support. Underdevelopment should be the expectation of a nation where lootocracy is a political agenda and where in a period of eighteen years (ie 1993-2011) 177 weeks of ASSUU strike actions were recorded. Though there had been relative stability for sometimes. Promoting visionary leadership and adequate funding of the educational system especially the primary education level is a key to national transformation and development.

Hence, it is suggested that;

- i) A complete overhaul of primary education infrastructural facilities, monitoring of its leadership, teachers and use of resources for education by multi-stakeholder's forum.
- ii) There is a need for increase annual budgetary allocation to education from the embarrassing 8.7% in 2013 to at least the UNESCO minimum benchmark of 26%.

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