

Repositioning Primary Education in Nigeria: Implications for Mathematics and Science Education

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Abstract: *Primary education in Nigeria has undergone tremendous and positive changes in both contents and methods since the colonial era. Primary education level is the foundation of the entire education system. Success or failure at this level affects the whole system positively or negatively. Primary school teachers play and will continue to play significant roles in the development and implementation of basic education curricula for sustainable development in the arts, social sciences, management, pure and applied sciences through teaching, research and evaluation of not only classroom instructional objectives but also the entire educational goals as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2014). Today primary education in Nigeria is facing imminent collapse due to some emerging issues such as poor funding, inadequate competent teachers, poor learning environments and a catalogue of other challenges in primary schools. This paper examined the foregoing challenges and suggested ways of repositioning primary education in Nigeria. A solid foundation of primary education is a panacea for sustainable secondary and tertiary education. Transformation of tertiary education must as a matter of necessity start from primary schools.*

1. Introduction

Primary education according to the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2014) is the education for children aged 6 years to 11 years plus. Primary school teachers have played and will continue to play significant roles in the development and implementation of basic education curricula for sustainable development in arts, social sciences, management sciences, pure and applied sciences through teaching, research and evaluation of not only classroom instructional objectives but also the entire educational goals as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2014). Primary education level is the foundation of the entire education system. Success or failure at this level affects the whole system positively or negatively. A solid foundation of primary education is a panacea for sustainable tertiary education. Transformation of tertiary education must as a matter of necessity start from primary schools. Any programme or agenda that intends to transform tertiary education without first transforming primary education must be insincere and unreasonable.

Today primary education in Nigeria is facing imminent collapse due to some emerging issues including inadequate competent teachers, poor teaching methods, corruption, inconsistent government policies, non-payment of pensions & gratuity, insecurity, poor learning environments and poor remunerations in primary schools in Nigeria. Reforming or transforming primary education is imperative and a necessary condition for sustainable tertiary education because it is in primary schools that the relay race for tertiary education commences. A faulty start at primary level may result in poor finishing at tertiary level. This paper examined the foregoing challenges and suggested ways of transforming primary education since the collapse of primary education will be detrimental not only to sustainable growth in science and technology in tertiary institutions but may ultimately result in the collapse of the entire education system. The discussion focused on the following sub-headings:

- 1) Objectives of primary education in Nigeria
- 2) Brief history of primary education in Nigeria
- 3) Challenges facing primary education in Nigeria
- 4) Strategies for transformation:
- 5) Conclusion

1) Objectives of primary education in Nigeria

Primary school curriculum is rooted in the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2014).

The general objectives of primary education according to the policy are to:

- a) Inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy and the 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 and contribution to life of the society.
- d) Mould the character and develop sound attitudes and morals in the child.
- e) Develop in the child ability to adapt to his or her changing environment.
- f) Give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him or her to function effectively in the society within the limits of his or her capacity.
- g) Provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

2) Brief history of primary education in Nigeria

The history of primary education in Nigeria is traceable to the promulgation of the 1948 Education Ordinance. This was the first primary education legislation that covered the whole country with its universalization (Domike & Odey, 2014). This ordinance gave rise to regional education laws such as the education law of Western Region (1954), Eastern Region (1956), Northern Region (1956) and the 1957 Lagos Education Ordinance (Labo-Popoola, Bello & Atanda, 2009). Consequently, in January, 1955 the Western Region introduced the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme which made education free in the region for all children aged

6 years on first January, 1957. The Eastern Region also abolished fees in 1957.

The post independence period in Nigeria was characterized by three National Development Plans (1962-1968, 1970-1974 & 1975-1980). All these plans laid emphasis on the development of quality primary education in Nigeria (Labo-Popoola, Bello & Atanda, 2009). The climax of the development plans was the introduction of 1976 Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme in the third plan by President Olusegun Obasanjo. It was described as Nigeria's boldest and greatest social scheme ever embarked upon by any African Government. By 1984 the Military Government of Nigeria scrapped the UPE policy. Both the Federal and State Governments reverted to fee-paying education policy (Nakpodia & Urien, 2011).

The Federal Government of Nigeria, in preparation for the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976 estimated that there would be a total of 11,521,500 pupils in primary schools nation-wide by the end of 1980. By 1979 the number had jumped to 11,410,260 (Domike & Odey, 2014). In order to further strengthen education in Nigeria, President Olusegun Obasanjo relaunched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme on September 30, 1999 in Sokoto State. The present education system involves 9 years of compulsory universal basic (UBE) education, the 9-3-4 programme replacing the 6-3-3-4 system. It is now certain that Nigeria is among the countries that have failed to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of education for all (EFA) by 2015.

3) Challenges facing primary education in Nigeria

The present state of primary education in Nigeria has nothing to write home about due to a catalogue of challenges. Prominent among the challenges are: Insecurity in various parts of Nigeria, poor learning environments, poor funding, inadequate and unqualified teaching staff in schools, poor working conditions for teachers, insufficient capacity building and retraining for teachers, severe poverty in Nigeria, parents' illiteracy, pupils dropout, explosion in schools enrollments, girls education, insensitivity on the part of politicians, inadequate planning, poor execution of programmes, inconsistency in government policies, inadequate monitoring, poor evaluation strategies, menace of proliferation of private schools, nepotism and tribalism in Nigeria. These challenges have reduced primary education standard to nothingness. Standard has collapsed. Parents are lamenting. Stakeholders are rather confused. Teaching in primary schools in some cases, has become all-comers affair. This ugly scenario is more worrisome now than ever.

Poor working conditions for teachers are among the most serious challenges facing the management of primary education in Nigeria. Teachers in many states of the federation are owed salaries for upwards of ten months. Many state governments have allegedly refused to even pay the N18000 minimum wage to teachers. A primary school teacher on salary grade level 15 in some states in South East earns about less than N100,000 monthly. It is now a taboo to pay primary school teachers pensions and gratuity. Primary school teachers in some states that retired more than 12 years ago are yet to be paid gratuity. Some have to reach an

agreement with the officers in charge to share the gratuity with them percentage wise or pay them the charges they demand in order get their files processed. If not the retired officers never get their files processed for payment. Some of the retirees are never sure when to get the pea-nut called pension. Many of the retired teachers have died in critical financial situations. Some are incapacitated and are abandoned as retched of the earth. Due to inadequate motivation and very poor remunerations of public primary school teachers many of them in urban areas have joined commercial motor cyclists popularly called okada. In rural areas some of the teachers have metamorphosed into petty traders, farmers, wine-tappers and hunters.

Education in the beginning according to Opadokun (2016) was a thing of beauty and Nigeria was commended and recognized within the commonwealth as one of the best in terms of standard and quality. What Nigeria of today offers as education is deceptive, Nigeria should have declared a state of emergency on the state of education longest time ago.

Insecurity in Nigeria has dealt a deadly blow to primary education in Nigeria in recent times especially in some states in Northern Nigeria. Boko Haram insurgency has dealt a blow on basic education delivery in Borno State (Bukarkulima, 2015). The terrorists have destroyed 512 schools. When you translate this to classrooms, it is over 1000, in addition to more than 350 teachers killed with unspecified number of children missing and/or killed. Boko Haram insurgency kept about one million children out of schools in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2015). More than 2000 schools were shut down while hundreds had been attacked, looted or set ablaze.

In April 2014 the terrorists abducted more than 200 girls from a boarding school in Chibok town in Borno State. We are worse than a conquered territory (Bukarkulima, 2015). The North-eastern Nigeria has remained one of the poorest parts of Nigeria with low levels of education, and the insurgency has worsened the social and economic crisis in the region. Many schools in the North-Eastern have been turned into camps for the Internally Displaced People (IDPs).

Poor learning environments are serious threats to the continued survival of primary education in Nigeria. Many public primary schools in Nigeria are characterized by dilapidated buildings. Many of the buildings are largely poorly ventilated. The floors are not cemented. Open roofs are a common sight. In rural areas some of the public and private primary schools look like shrines. Pupils study under tree shades sitting on stones and logs of wood. In urban areas some children go to schools with their seats on daily basis. Even many teachers have neither chairs nor tables. Instructional materials are usually scarce. Pupils trek long distances to schools in some cases.

Health facilities are not readily accessible to children. No first aid boxes. Many public primary schools have no toilet facilities. Pupils buy eatables from all sorts of food vendors within the school premises without control. This practice exposes the unsuspecting children to adverse health hazards.

Inadequate teaching staff in public primary schools in Nigeria has remained a recurring decimal to the detriment of quality teaching and learning. There are a large number of unqualified teachers at the basic education level (Anwuka, 2015). Inefficient policy and planning had hampered production of qualified teachers for that level of education. Over the years, what we have are unqualified persons in teaching who take advantage of lack of regulation in the system (Anwuka, 2015). Teaching in primary schools in some cases, has become an all-comers affair. This ugly scenario is more worrisome now than ever. Public and private primary schools are now infested with all sorts of people that parade themselves as teachers. Women of all shapes and sizes have taken over teaching in primary schools. Many teachers in the school system especially in public and private primary schools are incompetent. Experience has shown that some of the so-called teachers are using forged certificates. Some have no teaching qualifications at all. A situation where a primary school teacher is "jack of all trades and master of none" is no longer realistic. There are many people out there with teaching qualifications and quality certificates that are not employed.

Funding of education in Nigeria has seriously affected the growth and quality of education especially at the basic level. The gross neglect of education in the allocation of funds by successive governments, and the shabby treatment of teachers of all cadres, have combined to rob education of their traditional pride, dignity and honour (Ehusani, 2002). It is as if a tragic war has been deliberately waged against the destiny of the Nigerian people through the destruction of education, the very organ in which resides the hope of tomorrow (Ehusani, 2002).

The quality of life and work in our public schools and colleges, and the very environment in which teaching and learning take place, have become a thing of shame and a source of embarrassment to many of us who have an idea of what educational institutions should look like (Ehusani, 2002). In deed too many things have happened within the last 30 years to the structure, management, supervision, administration, financing of schools in Nigeria, culminating in a serious dislocation of the educational system, whose symptoms are the much decried fall in academic standards, wide spread indiscipline, examination malpractices and other vices. Perhaps an even greater dislocation occurs in the psyche of the contemporary Nigerian teacher, whose morale is now very low (Ehusani, 2002). So the teachers have tried, to have worked for more than four months without pay. We cannot guarantee any teacher going to class again on empty stomach (Abubakar, 2016). It is just unfortunate that a situation like this revolves around primary school teachers in Nigeria. If this trend should continue, the primary school system will soon collapse. It is a pity that this is allowed to happen despite the fact that education is the key and bedrock of our development particularly at the grassroots (Abubakar, 2016).

Severe poverty in Nigeria and school Dropout have been an impediment to the growth of education at all levels. The situation is so terrible that many parents and guardians cannot keep their children and wards in both public and private primary schools. Many of the children drop out of

schools. Some of the school heads compound the problems of parents and children by the introduction of irregular multiple fees in addition to the government approved fees. Most of the school dropouts are children of the poor. The so called free education in Nigeria is a mere paper-work due to corruption and illegal levies in schools.

According to Birdsall, Levine and Ibrahim (2006) most of the 104 million school-age children who are not attending school are poor and have parents who are uneducated and illiterate. In Nigeria poor children are less likely to start school, more likely to drop out and most likely to engage in child labour or domestic chores that keep them away from schooling. Education For All (EFA) cannot be achieved without adequately addressing reasons why the children of the poor in Nigeria cannot be enrolled in schools.

Available statistics show that 10 million primary school children are missing from our school system. A few more millions are missing from our junior high schools as well. The millions that dropout of high schools help to swell these figures (Daily Sun Editorial, 6 Dec., 2015).

2. Implications for Mathematics and Science Education

A solid foundation of primary education is a panacea for sustainable mathematics and science education in secondary and tertiary institutions. Transformation of tertiary education must as a matter of necessity start from primary schools. Reforming or transforming primary education is imperative and a necessary condition for sustainable tertiary education because it is in primary schools that the relay race for tertiary education commences. A faulty start at primary level in science and mathematics education may result in poor finishing at tertiary level.

The way forward

There are several steps that can be taken in order to reposition primary education. Some of the steps include:

- Adequate funding of primary education for infrastructure and other social amenities.
- Strategic planning and implementation of primary education programmes.
- Training and retraining of primary school teachers.
- Employment of qualified teachers.
- Regular payment of teachers' salaries.
- Regular payment of pensions and gratuities to retired primary school teachers.
- Stakeholders' sincerity in handling the challenges facing primary education in Nigeria.
- Expanding access to primary education for poor children and school dropouts.
- Curbing corruption in the management of primary schools by the Universal Basic Education Boards (UBEBS).
- Removing the "hearts of stone" from the politicians in order to appreciate the contributions of primary school teachers to national development.
- Effective regulatory framework to curb proliferation of sub-standard private primary schools.
- Holistic enhancement of the status of primary school teachers.

- Effective use of a clearly articulated curriculum that is content-rich and environmental-friendly.
- The federal, state and local governments prioritize and re-strategize on how best to fight insecurity in Nigeria.
- Effective monitoring mechanism with honest personnel.
- Saying no to examination malpractices in our schools.
- Revival and effective involvement of Parents – Teachers Associations (PTAs).
- Overall quality assurance in the entire education machinery from primary to tertiary.

3. Conclusion

Teachers at all levels of the education system are very important in the overall development of any nation. At every level, children who go to schools look on the teachers for the acquisition of the necessary skills to enable them become what they want to be (Nakpodia & Urien, 2011). Primary education is the core of development and progress in modern societies. Primary education is the largest sub-sector of any education system and offers the unique opportunity to contribute to the transformation of the societies through the education of the young ones (Domike & Odey, 2014). This transformation of the societies covers tertiary institutions. The inability of our higher education system to meet set standards is in connection with the very poor foundation pupils get in primary schools.

Governments at all levels in Nigeria should increase their percentage budgets for the entire education system especially basic education. Nigeria must invest in building high-quality basic education. Governments must partner with all stakeholders in the education industry to evolve a holistic upgrading of the entire basic education system. We need a much broader and deeper transformation of the educational system that commences in primary schools. Unless the primary education level is adequately repositioned the attempt at transforming higher education in Nigeria will remain a mirage. Our higher education cannot stand firmly without the solid foundation of primary schools-- **the corner stone** for the entire educational system. All hands must be on deck.

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