

Management of Primary Education in Nigeria: Trends, Constraints and Solutions

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Abstract: Primary education, in the geographical entity that is referred to presently as Nigeria, was 164 years old early this year. Before independence, the system was administered by different sets of managers including the Christian missionaries (1843-1882), the colonial government (1882-1940's) and the regional governments (1950's). Since, independence in 1960, the federal, state and local governments have played significant role in the administration of primary education. Poor administration has been the bane of the education system since inception. It is displayed in different ugly forms including poor timing of policy inauguration and programme implementation and pupil population explosion with the attendant result of dearth of educational resources. Statistical constraint, financial constraint and political constraint have contributed to the problem of poor management. For the system to survive, there is the need on the part of the nation to ensure political stability. It is only, when the polity is stable and all the tiers of government display the necessary political will that all the 3 constraints will be taken care of once and for all. The system will thus be invigorated and made fully prepared for the challenges in the future.

Key words: Primary education, geographical entity, population, management, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Primary education is very important in the Nigerian education system. It is the oldest system. Its history, in the geographical entity that is now known as Nigeria, dates back to 164 years ago, precisely 1843. It is 16 years, about 9 decades and at least a century older than secondary education, the Higher College, Yaba, the first known institution of higher learning, whose all departments were sited at one location and pre-primary education, respectively. Also, no other level comes close to primary education in terms of clientele. As at December 1996, there were 48,242 primary schools. Total 16,761,591 pupils attended these. Total 14,796,074 of them were in government or public institutions and the rest, 1,965,517, were in private schools (Gidado, 1997). By 2003, the number of primary schools had increased to 74,982 (The Universal Basic Education Commission, 2004).

In addition, primary education is the only link between pre-primary education and secondary education systems. It takes in successful beneficiaries of the former and supplies entrants into the latter. But more importantly, it is generally regarded as the very foundation upon which the other strata of the educational edifice are built. Granted that pre-primary education is a level below primary education, it is not considered as the foundation. This is because pre-primary education is available only in big towns and enjoyed by few children whose parents

could afford the high fees and other charges demanded by the private proprietors. Besides, primary education is the first level of the nation's 6-3-3-4 education system i.e., 6, 3, 3 and 4 years of primary education, junior secondary education, senior secondary education and university education, respectively.

Primary education, in the Nigerian education system, is very old, has the highest patronage and occupies a very important position. Uninterestingly, however, it is a weak system resulting from poor administration.

TRENDS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Primary education in Nigeria has passed through different times. In the formative period, 1843-1882, the system was in the hands of the various Christian missions. During the time, the teaching staff comprised the missionary, his wife and other employee(s). No consideration was paid at teacher quality. There was no barrier, whatsoever, to admission of students either. Imparting and acquisition of knowledge took place in the same building used for religious service. The different missions did not have a common syllabus. The subjects taught were: the 3 R's i.e., reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. If a female teacher was available, needlework could be added to the list. Due to the obvious inadequacies, the system was below the mark.

The colonial masters came up the stage between 1882 and 1940's. Through the whole course of the time, the government put in place rules and regulations, codified into ordinances and codes, essentially to direct the actions of all and sundry connected with the education system. The first Education Ordinance, enacted in 1882, made it possible for the state to provide financial assistance and maintenance for the schools (The education ordinance for the Gold Coast Colony, 1882). Each of the other ordinances and codes was a big improvement on the one before it.

Admittedly, there was a relative improvement, when a comparison of situation is made between missionary era and the colonial period, the performance of the system was still nothing to write home about. In 1920, the Phelps-Stokes Funds of United States of America and the International Education Board set up a commission to study education in West, South and Equatorial Africa. In 1922, it published a report entitled: Education in Africa. Members of the commission revealed this stark truth: The record of the Colonial Government in Africa is a mixture of the good and the bad, the effective and the ineffective, the wise and the unwise (Lewis, 1962).

Between 1954 and 1960, the regional governments were, to a very large extent, self-governing. Each regional government made laws essentially to regulate the primary education system. The Western and Eastern Regional Governments, for instance, enacted laws, among other things, for the free, Universal Primary Education (UPE) schemes launched in 1955 and 1957, respectively.

In spite of the efforts made so far, primary education remained a system of low quality. At the eve of independence, the Commission on Post-School Certificate and Higher Education in Nigeria, popularly referred to as Ashby *et al.* (1960) Commission, found that the command of English Language in the primary education system was much below the usual standard. Equally, the teaching workforce was of poor quality (Ashby *et al.*, 1960).

Since, independence, primary education has, for most of the times, been placed in the concurrent legislative list. Both the federal government and the state government have the right to manage it. As regards the third tier of government, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1978) clearly states: the functions of a Local Government Council shall include participation of such Council in the government of a State as respects . . . the provision and maintenance of primary education (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1990).

Upon the attainment of independence in 1960, there was the call for outright rejection of the education legacy of the former British overlords. According to Fafunwa (1991):

. . . many Nigerian educators and parents had been concerned about the lack of relevance of the Nigerian educational system in meeting the pressing economic, social and cultural needs of the nation. It was claimed that even after 5 years of Nigeria's independence, the educational system of the country was not only colonial, but more British than the British themselves; that is to say, the Nigerian school children were being educated to meet the needs of a foreign culture and were therefore better fit for export than for life in their own country (Fafunwa, 1991).

The educational system should meet the yearnings and aspirations of the nation. Towards accomplishing just that, there was the need to re-appraise its goals, objectives and content. This was the reason for holding the National Conference on Curriculum Development at Lagos in September 1969. The central message of the conference was the promotion of national consciousness and self-reliance via educational training.

About 8 years after the conference, precisely 1977, a National Policy on Education was produced. The document had been revised in 1981, 1989 and 2004. Altogether, the 61-page policy document has thirteen sections. The fourth section is on primary education.

Primary education, a 6-year programme, is for children whose ages range between 6 and 11 years. It is provided in institutions of learning. It was made free, universal and compulsory throughout the country with effect from September 1976. In 1999, i.e., 23 years after the launching of the Universal Primary Education scheme, primary education was made an integral part of a 9-year basic education programme. Five years later, precisely March 18, 2004, the National Assembly passed the Universal Basic Education Bill. It was signed into law by the President 2 months afterwards.

Clearly, the last one decade or so has witnessed great involvement of the governments in the management of primary education system. The federal government has the Federal Ministry of Education. This Ministry has the Department of Primary and Secondary Education. Besides, there is Universal Basic Education Commission. At the state government level, there is a Ministry of Education having a Department that has oversight function over primary education.

In addition, there is Universal Basic Education Board. At the local government level, there are: the Local Government Education Authority and the District Education Committee. All these agencies are put in place for the purpose of administration.

CONSTRAINTS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Management of primary education in Nigeria can hardly be given a pass mark in spite of all the efforts put up all these long decades. The first set of managers, the missionaries, could not accomplish much as evangelization was their goal. During the time, the management of the system was rather shoddy with the attendant result of poor quality of education.

Uninterestingly, however, poor administration is still a problem. This fact has been acknowledged openly by the nation's rulers during their tenure in office. While, inaugurating the National Primary Education Commission in 1989, General Ibrahim Babangida agreed that poor management was part of what led to the collapse of the 1976 free Universal Primary Education scheme (The Guardian, 1989). In the same vein, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo remarked, at the launching of the Universal Basic Education, that a number of unexpected and preventable problems made the Universal Primary Education of 1976 a programme that could not continue or last for a long time (The Guardian, 1999).

Poor administration is noticed in different ways. One of them is poor timing of policy inauguration and programme implementation. A case that readily comes to mind is that of the timing of the implementation of the free Universal Primary Education programme and the National Policy on Education. Ideally, a policy should first be in place before the implementation of an educational programme. But this was not the case as regards the inauguration of the UPE, a scheme believed to be the biggest of its kind in the continent and the launching of the National Policy on Education through which the scheme was managed. The exercise was carried out anti-clockwise, so to say. The policy came out in 1977, whereas, the UPE programme was launched in a hurry a year earlier.

Pupil population explosion is another way of showing poor administration. The free Universal Primary Education scheme launched by the regional governments, for instance, was not a story of full success. In Western Region, 547,760 pupils showed up to be taught in class I whereas the government planned for just 170,000 persons. The situation was even worse in the Eastern Region. The same experience was had during the launching of the UPE scheme in 1976. Whereas, it was projected that 2,300,000 6 years old would be admitted to primary class I at the commencement of the programme, 3,000,000 children actually appeared. This was 30% underestimation.

Naturally, the attendant result of pupil population explosion is inadequacy of educational resources. A decade after the federal government started the free UPE scheme and the full involvement of the local government in its administration; a one-time Minister of Education and Youth Development, Aminu (1986), presented this deeply shocking picture:

In one state capital, I witnessed an appalling situation where three classes made up of a total of 200 children, were sitting in the sun facing one blackboard. No learning or teaching could possibly take place under such a situation. It will be absurd to believe that pupils 'educated' in such an environment can compete on equal terms with those taught in what we regard as an acceptable environment. There were also schools with all that is considered desirable for teaching. But with the pupils still knowing precious little, clearly, teacher interest, discipline and supervision must be absent or inadequate under such circumstances. There is little doubt that whatever else we do we must take a direct interest in the attendance, teaching and supervision in these primary schools (Aminu, 1986).

The problem was compounded the more by the inadequacy in quantity and quality of the most important resource-teachers. The number available was grossly insufficient to cope with the myriads of pupils. Besides, the quality of the teaching workforce on ground was poor outright. The government herself admitted, in 1977, that ... a large number of our primary school teachers are below Grade II certificate or are untrained (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1978). The case of most of the teachers, who were ignorant as to the objectives of the system let alone knowing how to assist their pupils to achieve them, was like that of a blind leading the blind.

Many of the teachers in the system presently have Teachers' Grade II Certificate through the distance-learning programme provided by the National Teachers' Institute. According to Oni (1995) Anyone who has participated in the grading of the examination scripts of this crop of teachers will sympathize with the primary education system. ... In not too distant future, all ... will acquire the Nigeria Certificate in Education but whether they have benefited from the teacher education programme or not is another thing entirely.

Pupil population explosion is as a result of poor projection. Poor projection again, is caused by statistical deficiency. This is a major constraint.

There can be no doubt that when policy decisions are based on Incorrect figures, the anticipated quantitative targets can never be attained. For years, conduct of census has not been regular. Besides, on a number of occasions, the exercise had suffered from different difficulties including inadequate funds, manpower and uncooperative attitude of the citizenry when, they thought that it was a method devised by the government to have information for the purpose of taxation or they entertained the phobia of domination. Educational planners are thus handicapped when it comes to answering questions such as the number of children in the country presently or the number that will likely be each year in the years of the planning period.

Another major constraint is financial constraint. Inadequate financial resources had affected the supply of competent personnel and the provision of physical/material resources for the system almost since inception.

The missionaries could not accomplish much because the funds available to them were limited. Understandably, the colonial government introduced grants-in-aid system to assist any mission that applied. The 8-year free Universal Primary Education programme of the Eastern Regional Government in the 50's failed due partly to inadequate financing. In the early part of 80's, global oil crisis resulted in drop in national revenue and again took toll on the educational system. The Universal Primary Education scheme launched in 1976 too suffered major setback because the policy was conceived at a time Nigeria was a land flowing with milk and honey, but born during the period of serious economic recession.

Unstable polity, another constraint, is perhaps the greatest. Since independence, the political system has not been quite good. In the last 47 years, the military had been on the political stage for close to three decades. Quite often the change of baton of leadership has been through sheer force. Even during civil rule, the political climate has been very cloudy. Thuggery, assassinations, tribal conflicts and myriads of other crimes are very rampant. During crises, little or no attention is paid to education. Instead, all interest shifts to ensuring security.

CONCLUSION

In any system, stability is very important. Political stability affects growth and development. Unstable polity usually results in a state of uncertainty about what priority should be given to the advancement of education.

In addition, it is very necessary on the part of the government to educate all and sundry as regards the importance of having correct demographic data.

People should not allow personal prejudices, biases or political interests to have effect on the figures declared. It should always be noted that a projection is right to the extent of the correctness or reasonableness of its underlying assumption, conditions or factors.

Equally important, the different governments should have and display the needed political will towards the management of primary education. If serious commitment is there, then the governments will improve the funding of education.

Our present experiment, Universal Basic Education, of which primary education is an important integral part, would require about three trillion, 504 billion, 749 million, 53000, 42 ₦ (₦3,504,749,532,420). The amount would make it possible to ensure total and successful implementation of the programme over a period of one decade (Obanya, 2002).

There is the need on the part of the different tiers of government to research cooperatively so as to guarantee better financing. This is necessary so as to make provision for the right quantity and quality of teachers and administrative and supportive staff and at the same time expand the physical structures.

A lot would be achieved if the commitment of government were 100%. It would make it possible to engage in serious and genuine preparation of educational policies and implementation of same afterwards. A thorough management of the primary education system will make it adequately prepared for the challenges of the millennium.

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