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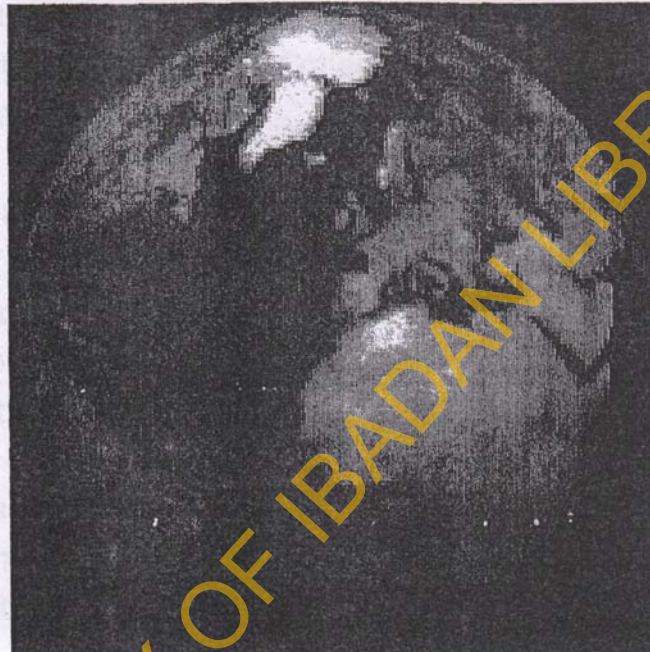
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REVITALIZING PRIMARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the issue of quality at the primary education level in Nigeria (i.e. how well the Nigerian primary school child progresses in school). It thus discusses the state of primary education programme in the country and factors that militate against quality implementation of the programme. Subsequently, it makes suggestions/recommendations on how to revitalize the country's primary education programme with a view to making it sufficiently qualitative to further contribute towards alleviating future needs of the primary school leavers and the nation.

State of Primary Education in Nigeria

Education, in its most unrestricted sense, is the process by which people are brought to an understanding and appreciation of what is valuable in human life (Deardeen, 1974; Obanya, 2000). When this process takes place in a school or similar settings, it is described as formal education. An individual is thus said to be formally educated when the individual shows signs of having benefited from a school-based curriculum (all the experiences provided for learners under the auspices of the school).

Primary education, as referred to in the Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), is the education given in an educational institution to children aged 6 years to 11 plus. It is the second level of education in the country's education ladder. The level is expected to enrich what has been learnt at the pre-primary level in order to create a solid base for future learning. The rest of the education system (i.e. secondary as well as tertiary institutions) is built upon primary education and thus this level is the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system. In Nigeria, primary education is expected to last for six years.

The goals of primary education, according to the National Policy on Education document (FRN, 2004), are to:

- inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate
- effectively;
- lay a sound basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the
- society;
- give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable
- him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capacity;
- provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including
- preparation for trades and crafts of the locality; among others.

It is thus expected that Nigerian children should be provided with quality primary education and that any Nigerian child who passes through this level of education should: adapt in any environment; show some ability to benefit from the secondary level of education; be literate (able to read and write to some reasonable extent); and be self reliant.

However, regardless of the expected outcomes of primary level of education in Nigeria, the products leave much to be desired. The results of evaluation studies on the progress of primary education in Nigeria vis-à-vis the stated goals show that primary education is not on track of achieving majority of the goals (Chiagha, 1996; Okpala, 1995). For this reason, perhaps, the Federal Ministry of Education with the support of UNICEF and UNESCO conducted a monitoring of Learning Achievement Study (Falayajo, et al, 1997) that was directed at assessing the extent to which primary Grade 4 children in Nigeria had mastered the literacy, numeracy and life skills aspects of the National Primary School Curriculum. The study reported that most children in primary Grade 4 in Nigeria are not acquiring essential learning tools, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are critical to their future. In the same light, a Situation Assessment and Analysis of the Nigerian Education Sector (UNICEF/FGN, 2001) revealed that in most Nigerian primary schools, children are being denied their rights to quality education while Matlin (2004) reported that Nigeria is among the countries at risk of not achieving even one of the goals of Education For All (EFA)

that border on achieving maximum access, quality and equity at basic education level. This state of poor quality in the country's primary education sector, perhaps, is not unexpected considering the numerous problems associated with primary education programme in the country.

Factors Militating against Quality Primary Education Programme

The state of school infrastructure, the number, quality and motivation of teachers, availability of instructional/educational materials and equipment, the curriculum content and pedagogical methods are among the key factors within the educational system that tend to affect the quality of primary education in Nigeria.

Inadequate Provision of School Infrastructure: One of the underlying problems in the Nigerian education system is inadequate provision of school infrastructure such as school buildings, chairs and writing desks to match the school-aged population. One of the fundamental issues with respect to infrastructure has to do with the physical conditions of primary school buildings. To what extent are primary school buildings available and conducive to create a favourable learning environment? The limited data available show that there is a wide gap between the number of schools and classrooms when compared to the school-aged population at this level. The data also reveal that only two thirds of the required number of primary schools in Nigeria are currently in place (but not in best of conditions) to support the full enrolment of primary school-age children (National Primary Education Commission, 1998). According to the report, the cities are characterized by dense population of children and limited number of schools and classrooms. However, the problem of inadequate provision of school buildings is worse in rural locations where a good proportion of primary school children receive instruction under artificial shade and trees. This unfavourable condition of school infrastructure could result in diminishing school enrolment and attendance, motivation of both teachers and learners as well as quality of teaching and learning.

Number, Quality and Motivation of Teachers: Of all the inputs that go into education provision, none is probably as significant as

the teacher. To buttress this point, data provided by UNESCO (1998) show that the number, quality and motivation of teachers are major determinants of pupil's achievement. Data from National Primary Education Commission (NPEC, 1998) show that in Nigeria the population of primary school teachers is about 426,794 and that approximately 15 million pupils are enrolled in primary schools. However, if all 6-11 year old children in Nigeria (estimated at about 19.9 million in 1998) had been in school, the national pupil-teacher ratio at this level would have been as high as 47:1. However, in some states, mainly in the northern part of the country, the actual ratio has approached 47:1 and even higher. For instance, the ratio is 73:1 in Yobe State, 56:1 in Born State, 46:1 in Kano State, and 44:1 in Jigawa State (FGN/UNICEF/UNESCO/UNDP, 2000). This scenario would thus jeopardized achieving qualitative learning outcomes in the country's primary education sector. Moreso, when research evidence (e.g. Onocha and Okpala, 1986) show that in Nigerian primary schools most practising teachers find it difficult to cope with large class sizes because such large pupil-teacher ratio creates unhealthy classroom interactions which tend to make it impossible for teachers to achieve their set out objectives.

However, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in the quest to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio, recruited a lot of people who do not have any teaching qualification as teachers in Nigerian primary schools. This gave rise to increase in the number of primary school teachers of low quality. This is in spite of the condition stipulated in the National Policy on Education (1998) that for one to be employed as a teacher in the Nigerian primary school system, the candidate is expected to possess at the least a Grade II Teacher Certificate in Education, a Nigeria Certificate in Education (N.C.E), or a university degree in primary education. However, the available data show that in 1997, 70 per cent of primary school teachers in the country had the Grade II Teacher Certificate, while in 1999, less than 40 per cent of the primary school teachers had the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) which, according to the National Policy on Education, should be the barest minimum qualification for teaching at the primary school level. Teacher quality could also be largely influenced by the quality of training received by the would-be teachers. The situation analysis of what goes on in the teacher training colleges in Nigeria (FGN/UNICEF, 2001) shows that teacher training institutions graduate student-teachers who are deficient in

content and methodology. The establishment of so many outreaches also compounded the problem of teacher quality and sandwich centres for teacher education programmes all over the country. As noted by Okpala (2001), outreach and sandwich teacher education programmes were known to be of very low quality considering their weak pedagogical bases and frameworks. Therefore, these training institutions are likely to graduate inexperienced teachers into the school system thereby creating a vicious circle of mediocrity.

The low rating of the teaching profession appears to be instrumental to people's lack of interest in taking up teaching as a career. To compound the problem, teachers are usually not paid. The incentive given to teachers by the government at all levels leaves much to be desired when compared with their counterparts in other professions. This has led to the migration of highly experienced teacher trainers in the country's colleges of education leaving behind a large number of inexperienced teacher trainers in the training institutions.

Curriculum Content and Teaching Methods: An evaluation of the Nigerian Primary School Curriculum shows that, on paper, the learning experiences that are expected to be provided to the Nigerian children at this level is rich and capable of meeting their immediate and future needs. However, the curriculum has been criticized for being overloaded and not sufficiently and effectively implemented as designed to meet up with the demands of the labour market and the practical realities of life (FGN/UNICEF, 2001). In the same light, Okpala (2002) expressed the view that the curriculum is characterized by too many content topics and lack suitable learning environment for effective implementation. The implementation problem also connotes inefficiency and lack of quality in translating what is on paper into reality in classrooms, playgrounds, school farms, and other settings for learning (a situation that has perhaps led to having poor or low quality curriculum outcomes at the primary school level). The outcomes of curriculum are regarded as the change in behaviour, knowledge acquired, skills, attitudes and values of learners after being exposed to the curriculum; and the performance indicators of implemented curriculum (e.g. achievement data) provide indices of the quality of the learning experiences actually provided to the learner. It is thus explicable that studies on learning achievement of pupils at different grades of

the primary education in Nigeria (Falayajo, et al 1997; Federal Ministry of Education, 2003) reported that most primary school children are not acquiring essential learning tools, knowledge, skills and values and attitudes that are critical to their future.

Another factor which can play a prominent role in determining the quality of education in any society is the pedagogical methods used while delivering instruction. The instruction delivery associated with a teacher is a reflection of the kind of training received by the teacher. This encompasses how a teacher interacts with the pupils during instructions. The most prominent activity that is expected to go on in any teaching and learning situation is interaction. The interaction can be between the teacher and the pupils, teacher and materials, pupil and materials, or pupil and pupil. However, what tends to feature prominently in most Nigerian primary classrooms is the uni-directional lecture method, with minimal use of materials, questioning of teachers or pupil-pupil interaction (Ogunkola, 2002; Okebukola, 1998; UNESCO, 1998). This is inspired of the views previously shared by some Nigerian educators (e.g. Okpala and Onocha, 1988; 1990) that the dominant use of lecture method with its characteristic monologue (teacher talking non-stop) can lead to rote learning. These educators had attributed the dominant use of lecture method in Nigerian primary education and secondary school classrooms to poor teacher preparation and resource inadequacy, considering that a good quality teacher is expected to be resourceful and innovative in the teaching methods even in a situation of acute shortage of teaching materials. However, since most Nigerian primary school children are still in their operational stage in development, this mode of instruction, (lecture method), which can amount to rote learning, could be ineffective. Moreso, when children at this stage in development learn better when they are presented with concrete materials and are at the same time are allowed to learn by doing.

Unavailability of Textbooks, Equipment and other Instructional Materials: The provision of learning materials tend to play a prominent role in determining the quality of teaching and learning in any classroom teaching-learning activity. This is against the background that availability of textbooks and other reading materials is a factor, which can greatly enhance or limit the arousal of pupils' curiosity, acquisition of knowledge and interest in learning

(Obanya and Okpala, 1985; Okpala, 1998). However, educational materials provision has been reported as being grossly inadequate in most Nigerian primary schools (FGN/UNICEF/UNESCO, 1992; FGN/UNICEF/UNESCO/UNDP, 2000; NPEC, 1998; WAEC, 1997). According to these research findings, there are situations where: classrooms lack furniture and pupils sit on bare floor; large numbers of Nigerian primary school children go to school without basic textbooks and other educational materials; and less than one per cent of Nigerian public schools have laboratory. Alongside these studies is a survey conducted in ten states in Nigeria (FGN/UNICEF, 1995), which also revealed that only 30 per cent of young children had access to the required textbooks.

Likely Things to be done by the Nigerian Government to Raise the Quality of Nigerian Primary School Products

For Nigerian primary education system to be able to realize the intended educational outcomes, a lot of things have to be put in place. These efforts at revitalizing the system should bother on improving the quality of teacher training programmes, improving the quality of instructional delivery, organizing in-service trainings for the practising teachers, reviewing the primary education curriculum, giving teachers enough incentives to boost their morals, making educational materials available, among others.

Improving on the Quality of Teacher Training Programmes: The teacher training colleges should have a broad-based curriculum content to encourage teacher trainees to acquire diversified skills in both the academic content and the teaching methods. The curriculum content should incorporate lessons that will enable them to be creative and resourceful. Efforts should be made to expose the would-be teachers to different kinds of teaching methods, the theoretical backgrounds and the implication of using or not using them. This will expose the trainee teachers to the hows, whys and when to use each of the methods they are exposed to. Practical experiences should be encouraged while in training. The transfer of knowledge to classroom practice can only take place when teachers have received significant classroom-based support (O'Sullivan, 2004). Classroom-based support will help to address the inherent difficulties involved in what has been taught in the classroom. Joyce and Showers (1980) termed this kind of practice 'coaching' and

argued that it plays a central role in the effective transfer of training content to classroom practice. Upon the completion of a course, efforts should be made by the teacher trainees to implement the new ideas, approaches or methods learnt during the course of study by undergoing the practice of teaching where course trainers or peers will observe them. This will enable the course trainer know the extent to which the teacher trainees are capable of implementing the curriculum with a view to achieving the intended outcome and the problems they are experiencing. With this information at the back of his mind, the teacher trainer will be in a better position to offer suggestions for improvements, and use such experiences as case studies while seeking for ways of improving the course content.

The use of classroom-based support will also help the trainee teachers to know the difference between the theory and the practice of teaching. Research has shown that there are a lot of benefits when this method is used to support practicing teachers in the form of in-service training (Stones, 1984; Smyth, 1986; O'Sullivan, 2004). This should be intended to support and develop the teacher's work and teaching methods rather than serve as inspection or a trait to the teacher's job. It should also be aimed at helping the practising teachers to discover their strengths and weaknesses, to assist them to regularly and systematically examine their personal teaching and see if there is a mismatch between intended outcomes and reality.

Improving on the Quality of Instructional Delivery: Effective teaching refers to the extent to which the teacher delivers instructions successfully in order to bring about the intended learning outcomes of the lesson or programme of study (Anderson, 1991; Kyriacu, 1991). They argue that for effective teaching to be achieved, the teacher should endeavour to bear the following in mind, namely: what the intended learning outcomes are, are they achievable, will it be appropriate to meet the learner's needs, what learning activities/instructional materials should be used to attain the intended outcomes. To them, a teacher who has these at the back of his mind is not likely to deviate from the desired target. Instead, such a teacher is likely to choose appropriate instructional materials and is also likely to know how to determine whether the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Teachers should always

endeavour to discuss the objective of the lesson he/she is about to teach with the learners, as well as ascertain the learners' level of cognitive entry behaviour. They should also tailor teaching and learning activities towards helping the pupils learn the subjects taught with a view to using their accumulated knowledge later in life. Experiences can be provided by showing, telling and through various other forms of communicating. The art of teaching should then be seen as the management of pupils' experiences in the classroom with the intention of promoting their learning. Thus, teachers, as managers, need a special body of knowledge and special skills too. For instance, teachers need academic subject knowledge, a powerful grasp of the ways (methods) the subject should be taught and the instructional materials needed for teaching them (e.g. books, films, materials for practices and field visits relevant to the study). These methods of communicating must be critically appraised and their uses fully understood. Furthermore, teachers should try as much as possible to incorporate as many as two to three teaching methods while teaching a lesson. Cockburn (1995) noted that a combination of different methods of teaching (e.g. discussion and direct teaching methods) at the same time proves to be a very effective way of teaching. This point of view had also been illustrated by Haylock and Cockburn (1989) when they expressed the view that Mathematical activity could involve the manipulation of concrete materials, symbols, language and pictures and those connections between these four types of experience constitute important components of mathematical understanding (p.13).

Teaching through discussion involves interaction between the teacher and the pupils, which may vary from whole-class discussion, in which everyone in the class is allowed to take part, to conversation between the teacher and an individual pupil. This will enable the learners to be aware of the importance or the gains of the subject they are being exposed to. To buttress this, Fox (1995) stressed that knowledge should not be simply given to learners. To him, learners must be encouraged to engage in intellectual work if they are to make sense of what they learn. Fox further stresses that a very important way through which teachers can help children to understand ideas is through holding dialogues, conversations or conferences with them about concepts in their curriculum or about their work. He argues that conversation helps children to think about their ideas (i.e. it promotes thoughtfulness). This will enable

the teacher to assess what children understood and build upon. It also helps the teacher to act more flexibly as ideas develop. This method, in addition, gives the learners the opportunity of being active participants, and thereby arousing their interest.

On the other hand, direct teaching encompasses direct teacher involvement, participation and interaction with pupils, and materials (informing, describing, explaining, questioning, modelling, demonstrating and coaching) through which the teacher directly transmits the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes that he/she wishes to develop in the learners (Good and Brophy, 1991). A lesson plan prepared using the direct method approach usually does have the following five main stages: setting out clear goals of the lesson, the teaching methodology (which focuses on exposition of what is to be learnt), using questions to check pupils' understanding, a period for supervised practice and a period to assess pupils work to check if the goals have been achieved (Cruickshank, 1990; Slavin, 1991). Gronlund (1991) asserted that the most sophisticated feature of direct teaching is based on a careful matching of teaching process to suit specific and clearly described learning objectives and then making sure that a reasonable number of the learners attained the intended outcomes. This may be likened to the mastery learning teaching technique whereby the learners are expected to achieve a set of learning objectives before they can progress to the next level (Bloom, 1964; Anderson and Block, 1987; Kulik, Kulik and Bangert-Drowns, 1990). Another important feature of direct teaching is the effective use of the academic learning time. This has to do with the percentage of the time allotted to topic which the teacher uses in successful learning activities. Advocates of direct teaching (Gage and Berliner, 1992; Kyriacou, 1991, 1995; Ornstein, 1990) have argued that direct teaching can be particularly effective in maintaining high levels of academic engaged time.

Making Educational Materials Available: The various levels of government (Federal, State and Local Government) should develop and implement a book policy that will involve supplying low cost edition textbooks and supplementary readers to schools. Individual pupils could be made to borrow these books on termly or annual basis and return them to the school authority at the end of the term or year for the next generation of pupils to use. The pupils should

however be made to replace any of the books that are severely damaged. The book policy should also cover setting up reasonable school libraries and other educational material resource centres at the various Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs). All the primary schools within the Local Government Area are expected to utilize teaching-learning materials and other educational facilities to be provided by these resource centres. It is also possible for the government to provide incentives for resourceful teachers to improve or develop educational materials to enhance the quality of teaching-learning processes in Nigerian primary classrooms.

Organizing In-Service Training for Practising Teachers: There is a need to initiate an intensive and extensive organization of in-service training and retraining programmes for practising primary school teachers in the country. These programmes can be instituted during long vacation periods which last at least ten weeks. This suggestion is against the background of insufficient number of practising teachers in the school system and the fact that most of these teachers are yet to obtain the proposed minimal qualification for teaching at the primary level (Nigerian Certificate in Education). It is expected that these programmes will provide ample opportunities for teachers to improve their knowledge base and relevant skills to ensure a more effective teaching without being absent from their duty posts during the normal school sessions. The various governments, particularly the Local Government Authorities, should also think of organizing neighbourhood support teacher education programmes, which will involve manageable co-operating groups of highly experienced/qualified, and inexperienced/less qualified teachers. It is expected that these groups will be meeting at least by-weekly during which professional problems experienced by the inexperienced/less qualified teachers will be discussed and solved with the cooperation of their highly experienced/qualified counterparts.

Reviewing the Primary Education Curriculum: There is an urgent need to review the Nigerian primary school curriculum. The review process should involve a cross section of all possible stakeholders in primary education: teacher trainers/educators at the university and college of education levels, curriculum developers, practising primary school teachers, parents, policy makers in education,

education monitoring officers, primary school inspectors, secondary school teachers, etc. The review should also focus on ensuring that the curriculum load (in terms of subject matter contents/topics) is sufficiently reduced to avoid unnecessary stress on the parts of both the teachers and the learners during the six-year primary education programme. In addition, it should provide sufficient strategies/suggestions on how to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum.

Giving Teachers Enough Incentives to Boost their Morale: It is also important that the government reviews the working conditions of primary school teachers in Nigeria. More importantly, the government should ensure that teachers' salaries and allowances are paid as at when due. The current demands for an enhanced salary scale by practising teachers, regular payment of pension and other retirement benefits to teachers who have retired from the public service and monetary incentives/grants/bursary award to teacher trainees should be granted without much delay. These demands and incentives are likely to boost the morale of practising primary school teachers and their associated teacher trainees in the country.

Summary

The right of the Nigerian child to education, particularly at the primary level, should go beyond the issues of access and equity only. The issue of quality (how well the child progresses in school) is also very important. At the moment, irrespective of the expected outcomes of primary education in Nigeria, the quality of the actual outcomes leaves much to be desired. It is for this reason that this paper discussed the relevant input and process factors that tend to militate against qualitative primary education in the country. The paper also made suggestions/recommendations (for the attention of relevant stakeholders) on how the primary education programme should be revitalized. The ultimate goal is to ensure that the programme is qualitative enough to make Nigerian children acquire essential learning tools, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are critical to their contributions to the country's future development needs.

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