

Review

Educational policies/programmes' effect on attrition rates in primary schools in Nigeria

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This paper examined attrition in primary schools in Nigeria with specific reference and focus on some policies and programmes of Nigeria's educational system with a view to highlighting its possible effect on the attainment of the Education for All (EFA) goals by 2015. It reviewed equal educational opportunity in relation to school environments that may be responsible for high pupil attrition or dropout, reasons for dropout, as well as the erstwhile Universal Primary Education (UPE) and how the sad experiences at implementation may recur in the current Universal Basic Education (UBE) without proper estimates of wastage indices like attrition rates among various cohorts. A major recommendation was that a data bank which captures the continuous flow of children from start to graduation be created for easy analyses of dropout or attrition rates in primary schools at any point in time. These estimates would be useful tools for educators in more effective and efficient management of the school system at this all important foundation level.

Key words: Educational policies/programmes, Nigeria, attrition, primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Equal educational opportunity in Nigeria and its implications on attrition in schools

The current policy of the Nigerian government is to make education accessible to all citizens irrespective of the circumstances of their birth. The question of equality of educational opportunity is not so much a matter of the amount of free tuition given by the government as the consideration that every single child in school, at whatever age and level, should be able to perform at his or her fullest capacity. Equal educational opportunity should therefore be better seen and organized in such a manner as to provide every single individual child every needed human, physical, and financial inputs in adequate proportions and as at when due. That is to say that a government which is interested in providing every citizen with equal access to education will be obliged to create an environment conducive to educational competition as between one school and another. A situation in this country where great and large variations occur in school plants and facilities, in school compound aesthetics, in the provision of teaching and non-teaching staff, in the distribution of amenities, e.t.c. cannot be said to be parading equal educational opportunities. The truth is that

differences in school environment may be a basis for keeping or not keeping the children in particular schools.

Perhaps Jencks' (1972) description in Duze (1988: 27) about the varied nature of school environments in the following extract would provide a very vivid picture of what some schools look like in Nigeria: Some schools consist of a single room in which children of all ages are mixed with a barely literate teacher and others are huge enterprises with highly trained staff from the world's leading universities. Some of these schools are run like prisons with rigid routines that determine what every child is doing almost every minute of the day while other schools are more like asylums, with constant battles to maintain order and no sequential activity that lasts for more a few minutes. A few schools are like permissive families, with children pretty working out what they want to do, doing it on their own or in groups, and getting attention or help from adults only when they want it or when they misbehave.

In Nigeria, we have all kinds of schools, private schools, public schools, mixed schools, single-sex schools, urban schools, rural schools, local schools, foreign schools, e.t.c.

All these schools operate in all sorts of environments of

which some are indeed very appalling. This salutes the attempt by Mrs. V. Ogbuagu, a one-time Commissioner for Education in Delta State, to close down all such “mushroom” schools found all over the State.

Given this diversity in school types and environments, one would not expect all schools to have exactly or precisely the same kind of effect on keeping the pupils they have admitted in school and causing the pupils to complete their schooling at the appropriate or stipulated time period. The implication is that some children would prefer certain kinds of school environment than would do others, and when a child is forced to remain in an unwanted or uncomfortable school environment, his performance at school in all the domains of learning, tends to fall below expected standards. This could lead to failures that eventually end in repeating the class or total dropout from school. On the other hand, the reverse could be the case. When a child attends a school in which the environment is enabling and loved, the child's achievements in school are usually maximized, and one implication for the system could be early completers from their cohorts. Therefore, if wastage rates are high in Nigeria primary schools, all stakeholders in the educational system must begin to catch the signal and run with it.

Another inference from the aforementioned extract is that the type of school a child attends tends to have profound effect on his academic achievements both in the present and in the future grades. This is why it is necessary not only to provide the child the opportunity of equal access to education but also equal or maybe equivalent access to every needed resource. The question is, is this possible in Nigerian schools where the government that is parading “equal educational opportunities” is the same one that is operating “quota system” in school admission and placement? Where then is the rationale in forcing children to go to school at the primary level with the UPE scheme now re-named UBE scheme when the outputs form certain tagged “educationally advanced States” cannot be admitted into Nigeria's next higher levels on the basis of Quota System and Catchment Area?

It has been noted that one of the “failures” observed as wastage in the educational system by Brimer and Pauli (1971) is the case when the educational system fails to recruit children into training owing to certain forms of differential treatment. Some of these differential treatments in Nigeria relate to the quota system in admission and placement; State of origin; tribe; the school's catchment's area; ownership of schools; etc.

Education for All (EFA) and its goals

Education for All (EFA) is a global concern which holds that education is a basic human right. Its history could be said to date back to 1948 with the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights. The issue of education as a basic human right which must be pursued vigorously re-echoed in a world conference in 1968 titled “The World Crisis in Education.” The conference defined basic education and recommended its promotion as the minimum for all citizens of the world. However, this was not of serious concern in the LDCs until March 1990 when a significant landmark in the struggle for basic education the world over culminated in the famous Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA) to be achieved by year 2000. Of special note is that the Jomtien Conference emphasized that basic education is not necessarily determined by years of schooling, but by the extent to which an educational programme is able to lay the solid foundations for lifelong learning. At the April 2000 EFA Forum in Dakar, the EFA target year was moved from 2000 to 2015, with the goals listed as follows:

- 1) Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- 2) Ensuring that by 2015, all children, particularly girl children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to a complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- 3) Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
- 4) Achieving a 50% improvement in the levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education.
- 5) Eliminating gender disparities in primary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- 6) Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all, so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy and essential life skills.

THE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION (UPE) AND THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (UBE) IN NIGERIA AND ATTRITION IN SCHOOLS

Education has been seen as one of the largest organizations in contemporary times. As a service it affects everybody in all societies. Even the education of the ancients affects the lives of the living today! It is perceived as the panacea to all the pathologies of mankind. Consequently, much faith has been placed on it by both its consumers and suppliers. To meet the educational needs of the ever growing population of learners, many countries, particularly the less developed countries (LDCs) of Sub-Saharan Africa, have stupendously expanded their educational systems, whereas the success or failure of national educational

systems lies on how well they are managed (Nwadiani, 1998). This implies that education must be managed in such a manner that it would yield the expected dividends to society. To do this effectively, planning and administration of policies and programmes for the system must be done not only effectively but also efficiently. If 100% efficiency must be achieved, then the system must eliminate all forms of wastage. The greatest wastage threat in the educational system is perhaps the one that arises from attrition or dropout from schools. In order to be constantly aware of its nature and pattern in the system reliable evaluation, researchers must continually examine this empirically. The findings would serve as useful tools to educational planners and administrators.

In pursuance of education as a means for meeting the socio-politico-economic as well as the scientific and technological needs of the society, Nigeria has made several efforts over the years to put in place a functional universal education programme for its citizenry. Notable among these efforts are the short-lived attempts of the pre-independence regional governments of the old Western and Eastern Regions in 1955 and 1957 respectively. Also very notable, was all the efforts put in by Nigerians and government to eventually arrive at and adopt a new national policy on education, which among other issues, operates 6-3-3-4 structure, stipulating six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary school education, three years of senior secondary school education, and four years of university education.

On September 6, 1976, about one and half decades after independence, the Federal government launched a Universal Free Primary Education (short-formed as UPE). It seems that it was the moment the "free" factor was expunged from the popular tag of "UPE" instead of "UFPE" that the scheme began to die. Despite the full name of this programme, pupils in most places in Nigeria paid fees to attend the public UPE schools. However, this scheme was also short-lived due to inadequate funds to sustain it arising from the unexpected astronomical increase from the number of children that eventually turned up, among many other factors. For instance, Fafunwa (1984) and Yoloye (1984) on their contributions to the Implementation of the National Policy on Education reported that instead of the 2.3 million children expected, 3 million children turned up resulting in an under-estimation of 30%. The Federal government had earmarked N300 million for school buildings and facilities and N200 million for crash programmes in teacher training to accommodate the estimated additional of 36,000 classrooms and 59,500 teachers to cater for the expected 2.3 million new six-year olds. There was consequently a serious shortage of classroom spaces, teachers, equipment, materials, etc, right from the on-start.

However, Nigeria had launched one of the greatest education projects in the history of African education.

Besides, when the UPE scheme was launched simultaneously by the military Head of State and all the military governors in the nineteen States in September 1976, it meant that one out of every two African children attending primary school in Africa was a Nigerian. The UPE scheme triggered off a phenomenal rise in pupil population. By 1982 when the first products of the programme should graduate, the pupil population had risen to 15 million, with enrolment figures jumping from 6 million in the preceding UPE year (1975/1976) to 8.7 million in the first UPE year (1976/1977) and to 12.5 million in 1979/1980. The UPE scheme was predicted on the assumption that every Nigerian child has an inalienable right to a minimum of six years of primary education to be an integral part of a Nigeria that is "free and democratic, just and egalitarian, united, strong and self-reliant, having a great and dynamic economy, with bright and full opportunities for all citizens" (Federal Republic of Nigeria {FRN}, 1970). These were the five major national objectives on which Nigeria's National Development Plans were focused as well as guided national education development since the 70s. Thus, the objectives for Nigeria education include:

- 1) The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- 2) The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society;
- 3) The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around; and
- 4) The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competencies both mental and physical as equipment for the individual's survival in and contribution to the development of his society.

These broad national objectives are further specified for each level and type of education. To this end, the objectives of the National Policy on Education for primary education are (FRN, 1981):

- 1) The inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively;
- 2) The laying of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- 3) Citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- 4) Character and moral training and the development of sound attitudes
- 5) Developing in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment;
- 6) Giving the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capabilities; and
- 7) Providing basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts by linking the school with the trades and crafts of the

locality.

To achieve these objectives, the new primary school curriculum consists of the following: (a) language arts, which use the language of the immediate community for the first three years and English at a later stage; (b) mathematics (c) elementary science (d) social studies (e) cultural arts (f) health and physical education (g) religious and moral instruction, and (h) agriculture and home economics.

It is therefore hoped that with these objectives, every Nigerian child of school-age, including the poorest child from the poorest part of Nigeria will have access to a free six years of primary education, irrespective of the religious, social, or economic status of his parents. Besides, the civilian government of 1979, reviewed the new national policy on education, issued a revised edition of it in 1981, and re-affirmed its commitment to it as follows: (FRN, 1981):

- 1) Education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because education is the most important instrument of change, as any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution;
- 2) Lifelong education will be the basis for the nation's educational policies;
- 3) Educational and training facilities will be multiplied and made more accessible, to afford the individual a far more diversified and flexible choice;
- 4) Educational activity will be centered on the learner for maximum self-development and fulfillment;
- 5) Universal basic education, in variety of forms, depending on needs and possibilities, will be provided for all citizens;
- 6) Educational assessment and evaluation will be liberalized by basing them in whole or in part on continuous assessment of the progress of the individual;
- 7) Modern educational techniques will be increasingly used and improved at all levels of the education system;
- 8) Efforts will be made to relate education to overall community needs;
- 9) The educational system will be structured to develop the practice of self-learning;
- 10) At any stage of the educational process after primary education, an individual will be able to choose between continuing his full-time
- 11) Studies, combining work with study or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later on;
- 12) Opportunity will continue to be made available for religious instruction. No child will be forced to accept any religious instruction which is contrary to the wishes of his parents; and
- 13) Physical education will be emphasized at all levels of the education system.

Furthermore, the government considers it to be in the

interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. To this end, government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. Each Nigerian child will study at least one of them up to the first three years of secondary education in Nigeria. Today, these lofty ideas failed to be achieved due to a number of factors bothering mainly on the political, economic and social contexts.

The political context portrayed a situation where the federal government holds the "purse strings" with each state government having considerable liberty to formulate its own educational policies and establish its own institutions with little interference from the federal government. To this extent, several things had taken place in the educational system of the states which were not specified in the national policy on education. A prime example was the case of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) controlled states which had operated free primary/secondary education with 100% transition from primary to secondary since 1979, whereas the national policy envisaged 40% transition with effect from 1982. At the other end were some states that were running fee-paying primary/secondary education that had not attained the stipulated 40% transition. A major reason was that most of the pupils dropped out of school on economic grounds.

The economic context revealed that while the UPE scheme was conceived during the "oil-boom" years of Nigeria's economy, the actual birth came in the "oil-doom" years when the economic recession had begun. They also noted that three kinds of problems had arisen from the implementation of the UPE scheme, namely, the financial burden, the lowering of educational standards, and the dilemma of how to utilize the products of the scheme.

In the social context, the hue for the so-called "educational imbalance" between different sections of the country had generated intense debates, with the concept of the "quota system" being very topical, and eventually became operationalized under different guises including the federal character issue. Thus the high social demand for access to education, especially higher education, had led to some serious concerns in the so-called "educationally advanced" states in Nigeria. While some states paid handsome allowances to attract and keep their children in school from the Federal purse others like Imo and Anambra states had to charge high fees from parents to keep their own children in school.

The resultant effect was attrition in most of the fee-paying schools and also in the non-fee-paying schools when the economic recession spared neither the Federal/State governments nor the parents/guardians. But the disquieting thing was that despite hues and cries everywhere about the increasing number of Nigerian children who ought to be in school roaming the streets,

neither government nor investigators bothered to study the situation empirically. Hence the dearth of research studies in this area. The short-run implications for the school system and the long-run implications for the nation's economy are far-reaching. Besides, there are other consequences of student wastage apart from the usually conceived economic consequences. Their "social and personal costs are considerable if viewed in terms of unfulfilled expectation and the social pathology which come in the wake of large scale disorganization" (Avoseh, 1975: 25).

Attrition in schools was apparently ignored while a great deal has been said and written about enrolment explosion in schools. The dwindling resources in schools coupled with the school population explosion in Nigeria had tended to give the false image that attrition is no threat to the educational system in Nigeria. Whether we like it or not, this vital school statistic has to be evoked for effective and efficient planning and administration of our educational system (Duze, 2001).

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) is a broader concept and a "senior sister" to the UPE. It could be regarded as a more ambitious programme than the UPE. Launched in 2000, its major objective is to provide equal access to appropriate education for all citizens with the intension of impacting greatly on the entire life of the Nigerian people. The specific objectives of the UBE are (Federal Government Implementation Guidelines, 2000):

- 1) Developing in the citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion;
- 2) The provision of free, universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school age;
- 3) Reducing drastically the incidence of dropout from the formal school system (through improved relevance, quality, and efficiency);
- 4) Catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or the other, have had to interrupt their schooling through appropriate
- 5) Forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education;
- 6) Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills, as well as the ethical,
- 7) Moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning.

The policy-makers in Nigeria claim that in terms of structure, the UBE programme, like the UPE still falls under the 6-3-3-4 education structure in Nigeria. They claim that the paraded "9-3-4" structure is wrong. The only difference, according to them, is that instead of a break between the end of the six years of primary education and the beginning of the first three years of secondary education, both run together to make a continuous total formal education period of nine years.

The idea was that educators believed that this elongation would not only eradicate illiteracy but also produce better educated persons that would effect and manifest functional life-long education in Nigeria. The UBE programme is therefore geared towards ensuring the provision of formal basic functional education for all citizens as well as Nigeria's commitment to the pursuit of the "Education for All" (EFA) mission of the global community on total eradication of illiteracy by the year 2015.

Ochoga and Akpakwu (2005) reported that the nation's literacy rate is currently estimated to be 57%. According to them, a study conducted by the National Primary Education Commission (NPEC) in collaboration with United Nations International Culture and Education Fund (UNICEF) in 1999 identified low enrolment as a major problem in the delivery of primary education in Nigeria. The current enrolment figure was estimated to be 15.5 million pupils nationwide. School age children constituted almost 50% of the nation's population that is nearly 150 million, and those over 30 years of age constituted over 70%. Also, a total estimate of the primary school-age children (6 to 12 years) indicated 19.5 million. Thus, from their estimates, about four million primary school-age children are out of school in Nigeria. The study however did not indicate whether the whole four million were dropouts. Here again, the issue of student attrition was not clearly distinct. This is not a healthy development if Nigeria must attain one of the UBE major objectives of reducing drastically the incidence of dropout from the formal school system. Records of estimates on student wastage are important at any point in time for effective and accurate evaluation of the UBE programme and the entire educational system in Nigeria.

Some reasons for attrition in primary schools

Observations and opinions of different individuals and groups as well as researchers have identified some of the reasons for attrition and drop-out at the primary education level. Some of the reasons include (Calcott, 1967; Yoloje, 1975; Avoseh, 1975; Duze 2003):

- 1) Underage. This was not so great since 1962 when inspecting assistants began to operate in the schools.
- 2) Cost of education – parents send their children to school thinking that it is "free primary education" and then discover that they must purchase books, writing materials, clothes, etc. This misconception, especially in the rural areas, can become too great a financial burden for parents and guardians.
- 3) The loss of child labour – parents realize the value of the children for certain types of domestic and agricultural labour and are unable to do without these.
- 4) Some children fear severe discipline in school and therefore refuse to go to school.

- 5) Parents become discouraged if after a while they do not see any progress in learning techniques in their children.
- 6) The lack of remunerative job opportunities gives little incentive for parents to keep their children in school.
- 7) Pupils in higher grades are often threatened at school about failing examinations and thus bringing down the school's percentage performance in external examinations.
- 8) Ill-health.
- 9) Parents' education. Children from less educated parents tend to have higher dropout rate than those from higher educated.
- 10) Parents' occupation. Children of craftsmen and artisans tend to have higher dropout rates than other higher categories of occupations of parents.
- 11) Number of father's wives (polygamy). Children from polygamous homes tend to have higher dropout rates than those from monogamous homes.
- 12) Reasons that bother on government's poor implementation of their educational policies and programmes – these include variations in structural arrangements of the school, personnel supply and qualification, and the material condition of the school system.
- 13) A case of the individual's stubbornness and unwillingness to go to school.

CONCLUSION

Issues concerning educational wastage in terms of attrition and dropout rates at the primary educational level were reviewed. It also reviewed government's policies and programmes that are relevant to primary education, especially the erstwhile UPE programme, and the present UBE programme and their relationship to attrition and dropout in the formal educational system in Nigeria.

It was evident from this discourse that a lot is yet to be known about wastage in our primary educational system. Estimated average attrition rates of 50 percent and above for primary schools, from the few studies done some years back, were rather high and embarrassing for Nigeria considering the huge inputs into her educational system.

Implications for Nigeria's education

From this discourse, it thus seems that the government's vision through her laudable policies and programmes to eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria by the year 2015 may not happen. Nigeria had hoped that with the elongation in structure of the primary school year period of formal education from six to nine years, the nation would not only eradicate illiteracy but also produce better educated persons who would effect and manifest functional lifelong

education in Nigeria. Therefore as long as the children put in school at the foundation level which is the primary level continually fail to remain in school or fail to complete their programmes at the stipulated time, these hopes would continue to be dashed. If low enrolment has been identified as a major problem in the delivery of primary education in Nigeria (National Primary Education Commission and United Nations International Culture and Education Fund, 1999), then the problems of attrition and dropout would invariably deplete enrolment much more. Besides, the nation's literacy rate estimated to be 57% (Ochoga and Akpakwu, 2005) has not met the "Education for All" (EFA) mission of the global community on total eradication of illiteracy by the year 2015. This development is definitely unhealthy for our educational system since a major objective of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is to reduce drastically the incidence of dropout from the formal school system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From this discourse, we recommend that the Ministries of Education in all States of Nigeria should adopt a specific period every year in the school calendar for comprehensive estimation and evaluation of attrition rates in primary schools. There should also be created a data bank that will continually capture the flow of students in each cohort from start to graduation to facilitate analyses on cumulative dropouts and attrition rates.

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