

Universal Basic Education in Nigeria: Matters Arising

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KEYWORDS Universal. Basic Education. Primary Education. Secondary Education

ABSTRACT This paper examines the issues considered significant in the implementation of Universal Basic Education scheme in Nigeria. It employs the analytical approach as its method of explaining issues and raising vital questions on the possibility of the scheme being successful in Nigeria. It concludes that proper planning and effective implementation are required for the programme to be successful.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's educational system has witnessed a catalogue of changes in policies and programmes. Some of the changes have appeared to a number of people desirable while one continues to wonder, why some of the other changes were ever initiated. In fact, many of the changes in educational policies in Nigeria have been described as the product of confusion (Ayeeni, 2000). There is therefore, a high level of uncertainties, which is beclouding meaningful planning in Nigeria's educational system. This can be very dangerous particularly as the future of Nigeria and Nigerians will be determined by the level of education her nationals have acquired.

In September 1976, the Federal Government of Nigeria launched the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Scheme. This Scheme which was welcomed in many quarters in Nigeria was abandoned midway. In November 1999, the present administration under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme in Sokoto for the nation. The re-launching of a similar programme to UPE by the Federal Government of Nigeria, indicates that there is something desirable which the scheme is expected to enable Nigerians achieve. The task of this paper therefore, is to analyse Universal Basic Education, examine what it aims at achieving and assess the level of preparedness for the scheme to allow for the realization of the objectives of the scheme.

The paper employs the analytical approach as its research method. This method of analysis is considered most appropriate to use here because it will enable the researcher to actually

analyse and raise vital questions on the plans for and the implementation of the Universal Basic Education Scheme in Nigeria. Since this research method lays emphasis on clarity, it will allow the reader understand how the researcher arrived at his conclusions. It could also help the reader to draw his conclusions that are different from that of the researcher based on his understanding of the analysis given (Aluede, 1999).

At this juncture, it will be necessary to establish our concept of UBE. Universal in this context will mean the whole people without exception. Basic will mean that, on which anything rests. It is the root or bottom or the foundation from which other parts get support. While education will be interpreted to mean the act of bringing up or training of a child, through instruction and in the process bring about the strengthening of his powers of body and mind to be able to understand his culture. Education is an instrument for conserving, transmitting and renewing culture. It is therefore, the sum, total of person's experience (Mallinson, 1980; Moore, 1982).

It is worthy of note that the UBE is a new innovative trend in Nigeria's educational frame work particularly as it is programmed to be for 9 years. That is, it is designed to cater for a child's education from primary school to the end of the Junior Secondary School. It is also expected to be universal, free and compulsory. This is however, an expansion of the duration of the UPE to include the first three years of secondary education in the current UBE scheme (Enemuo, 2000).

THE GENESIS OF UBE

The current UBE scheme in Nigeria can be

said to be the product of earlier educational scheme, programmes and educational decisions. It is the offshoot of previous schemes, which could be said to have been bedeviled by problems, which the current scheme is expected to offset. It should be noted that educational activities of the 1950s laid the foundation stones for later educational developments in the 1960s and beyond. Educational activities of the 1950s were themselves determined by the history of educational growth from the fourth decade of the 19th century. By implication therefore, educational explosion in the Western region had influences on other regions. It should be recalled briefly that the 1950 Macpherson Constitution created regional houses that were responsible to the central government in Lagos. The constitution also empowered the regional houses to make laws in education. The effect of this was that regions grew differently in educational provisions (Aluede, 1992; Kosemani and Okorosaye-Oribite, 1995).

In the Western Region, Chief Obafemi Awolowo gained the opportunity of putting his concept of education into practice. Thus, as the leader of the Action Group Party, he placed priority on education by drawing up a comprehensive educational development plan and adhering strictly to this policy because he believed that to educate the children and enlighten the illiterate adults, is to lay a solid foundation not only for the future social and economic progress, but also, for the political stability of the region in particular and the country in general. He therefore, introduced a free, universal and Compulsory Primary Education (UPE) in 1955 which is synonymous with his name in Nigeria today (Taiwo, 1980).

The Eastern Regional House that introduced the UPE scheme under the leadership of Dr. Azikiwe in January 1957 followed the Western Region's example. The Lagos area that was cut off from the educational programmes of the Western Region in 1954 when it was declared a Federal Territory, equally introduced the UPE scheme in January 1957. It should be noted that educational development in the Northern Region lagged behind what was being experienced in Lagos and other regions because, while the Western and the Eastern Regions were struggling hard to out do one another in the South, the Northern Region did not face the challenges of the time. However, the Federal Government of

Nigeria became conscious of the dangers of disparity in educational development in a nation state and therefore introduced the UPE scheme throughout the federation in 1976. Thereafter, there was the regularization of primary education system throughout Nigeria. The differences that had existence in the different regions were checked by the Federal Government's decision that all states of the federation must run similar programme (Itedjere, 1997).

The UPE scheme failed perhaps because the Federal Government of Nigeria underestimated the number of pupils that would want to benefit from such a programme, could not also determine the number of teachers, school buildings and the amount of money that would be required to make the programme functional. It was therefore abandoned. However, the recent relaunching of a similar programme — the UBE scheme by the Federal Government of Nigeria would suggest that after the failure of the earlier programme — UPE scheme, and after a careful analysis of the factors that brought about the failure of the earlier scheme, a more careful planning would have taken place. An assessment of the UBE scheme will be carried out much later in this paper but before then, it will be necessary to look more closely at the reasons why the UBE scheme was launched.

THE NEED FOR THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION SCHEME

The training of children and adolescents in the norms and aspirations of the nation is a very veritable instrument for national integration and development. It was expected that educational reforms or re-organisation would be carried out to enable Nigeria's education cater for the future professional needs (Ayeni, 2000). The restructuring is important, if we are to expect optimal result from our envisaged objectives of education. The Federal Government's involvement in the organization of UBE scheme was therefore necessary if the integration of the nationals was to be achieved. The scheme was also desirable to enable the Federal Government ensure that children are taught the culture of the society. The desire to inculcate in children the knowledge of literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate made the UBE scheme worthwhile. Apart from the above, there is the need to lay a sound foundation for scientific and

reflective thinking, character and moral training and the development of sound attitude, and above all, develop in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1981).

If we reflect on our earlier definition of education as an instrument for conserving, transmitting and renewing culture, it will clearly become obvious that the school system occupies a very important position if the objectives for the primary and secondary education as stated by the Federal Government will be realized. This therefore, necessitated the launching of the Universal Basic Education Scheme in November, 1999.

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION: MATTERS ARISING

The Universal Basic Education as introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria has been described above as laudable but it appears that it is leaving many issues unresolved which are likely to bedevil the programme just as the UPE scheme was.

The name 'Universal Basic Education' ordinarily would have suggested that every Nigerian child, without exception would have access to basic education without hindrance. Now that a ceiling has been placed on the enrolment figures for each state of the federation, it is obvious that limitations has been introduced. This quota limitation, according to the national co-ordinator, was informed by the differential level of illiteracy in the states of the federation (Enemuo, 2000).

- (i) The question therefore is, through this measure, is it possible to realize the national aspiration of building a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens?

Perhaps, at this juncture, it will be necessary to revisit the questions that have been asked by Enemuo, (2000: 8).

- (a) While placing a ceiling on the number of pupils registrable in the states, would the programme still be qualified as 'universal'? The answer to this question is obvious.
- (b) Does the placement of ceiling on enrolment figures not portray the UBE scheme as yet another device for strengthening and perpetuating the principles of 'quota system', 'educational disadvantaged' and 'educational advantaged' in admission.

- (c) Is attainment of literary in education measurable in terms of enrolment?
- (d) Does the fact that one comes from the so called educationally advantaged state render one also educationally advantaged and vice-versa?
- (e) Is the UBE really not an instrument for unjustly denying children in some areas access to or right to education and perpetuate illiteracy to the words and spirit of section 18(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria?
- (f) Will the UBE scheme not attract similar counter balancing schemes by states whose sensibilities have been injured by the measure of deprivation as it happened when the Quota Admission Policy Scheme was introduced in higher institutions of learning in Nigeria? And
- (g) Will such states not run a counter primary education scheme that will render UBE meaningless?

Another aspect that should be examined is the plans for the implementation of the Universal Basic Education Scheme. Since the objectives of the Universal Basic Education did not differ significantly from the objectives of the Universal Primary Education Scheme, one would perhaps have reasoned that the UPE scheme failed because of lack of proper planning.

The question that may bother our minds at this point in time is how prepared are we for the UBE scheme?

- (a) Have we been able to estimate the number of pupils that will be in our school system?
- (b) Have we improved on our method of keeping birth and death records to enable us know of the number of children that will be of school age at any given time?
- (c) How many schools will be required at each ward level, in each Local Government Area and in each State?
- (d) A follow up of the above question will be, if the number of schools on ground are not going to be adequate, what preparations have we made to build new ones and renovate existing ones?
- (e) If nothing of this sort has been done, have we learnt anything from the failure of the Universal Primary Education Scheme that was introduced some twenty-four years ago?
- Another area that may be of primary importance is the curriculum itself. Has the

curriculum been reviewed to cater for the differential needs of the Nigerian populace? It is obvious that language problem still exists in Nigeria. It is very important to resolve this because the extent to which we shall be able to realize our hopes and aspirations in our educational programmes is dependent on our language skills. In the current Nigerian situation, which of the over five hundred and thirteen ethnic languages are we going to use in communications in schools?

Moreover, what is our teacher training programmes like? Have our teachers been trained to read and write in many of these ethnic languages?

What is the projected teacher-pupil ratio? Given that many pupils took advantage of the UPE scheme in 1976 which brought about explosion in school enrolment and sudden increase in the number of schools and teachers required which of course, resulted in the use of shabby school buildings and untrained teachers, would it not have been desirable to engage in proper planning before the implementation of the UBE scheme? It is worrisome to note that in the 21st century, a programme of this nature is being embarked upon without proper planning.

It would not have been out of place for the Federal Government of Nigeria, who had witnessed the failure of a national programme of the type that she is now wanting to implement to go into proper documentation of the procedure she will adopt to realize the national hopes and aspirations for education. It should not have been too much a task for the federal government to know the number of desks, seats, books and other learning materials that will be required for the programme to succeed.

Proper computation is considered here very important in arriving at the financial implication for running such a scheme. It should be noted that teachers that will be employed to teach will need to be paid their salaries and that if we do not know the number of teachers that will be involved, it is obvious that we may not be able to compute how much it will take to pay teachers and run the programme.

It should be noted that improper planning could bring about the failure of any programme no matter how laudable the objectives may be.

It is difficult to understand how a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria will bring about National Unification through a UBE scheme that

does not aim at giving every body access to education. It is obvious that some states will go ahead to run educational programmes that will be better in quality than that of the Federal Government if the discriminatory tendencies of the UBE scheme is hardboard on continuous basis. It should also be noted that private schools have emerged to attain position of eminences in some states of the federation. Is the Federal Government going to stop private schools from functioning under this new arrangement? If schools with facilities in place, qualified teachers that are well paid and motivated exist side-by-side with schools that do not have such qualities as described above, will this not amount to introducing class structure into our educational system? Will the children of the rich not continue to attend good schools while the children of the poor ones in this country will continue to attend schools with poor learning facilities, without adequate number of staff or at best poorly staffed schools? Will all these lead to equal treatment of all Nigerian citizens?

In conclusion, it has been analyzed in this paper that Universal Basic Education is both a desirable and a laudable project as being embarked upon by the Federal Government of Nigeria. It has also been said that the forces that brought about the failure of a similar programme – the Universal Primary Education scheme are still very much around. These forces are – lack of proper planning, inability to project the estimated population that will be in school during the period, lack of knowledge of the number of teachers that will be required, inability to estimate the cost of providing the accurate number of school buildings, learning facilities and the financial implication of the entire programme. These factors could as well, bring about the failure of this UBE scheme. An additional factor that would bring about the failure of this UBE scheme is the quota admission policy that is being introduced with the scheme. This has never been accepted and tolerated by the Nigerian populace. It is very likely to attract the counter balancing measures, which the introduction of quota policy received when it was introduced in our universities. As State-owned universities rose in the states that felt that quota admission policy did not favour them, so we may expect new and better furnished primary schools in states that will feel discriminated against by the introduction of the

UBE scheme. However, the scheme, if properly implemented, particularly with adequate considerations given to the forces that could bring about its failure as identified above, will enhance Nigeria's educational and overall development.

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