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MANAGING PRIMARY EDUCATION IN A DEPRESSED ECONOMY – THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The pursuit for development has been emphasized without due and commensurate regard for total education as a binding tool for the attainment of such goal in view. The government is shying away from undertaking the total funding of education in the pretext of pursuing wasteful economic and political policies which cannot materialise in an illiterate society. The economic and financial position of rural populace has made it difficult for patriotic Nigerian children to be given basic primary education. Education which is accepted as a basis for social, political, economic and scientific development is denied to a substantial percentage of the school age children. It liberates and opens the mind to progress. It is the vehicle of social change and an effective weapon for human mobilisation for development. An illiterate society is a stagnant society ridden by diseases, ignorance, poverty and under-development. In the light of the above, this paper sets out to address the problems of managing primary education in terms of funding and financing, manpower needs, professional competencies and entry qualifications of teachers etc. Meaningful suggestions are also given.

Introduction

The national stability of Nigeria as a country is shaky. This is due to the numerous problems facing the country ranging from political, social, economic, educational, industrial etc. The most pressing of these is the one concerning our educational sector of which primary education becomes our focal point of discussion.

Education at the primary school level is, without any doubt, a stepping stone to greater heights. It is the foundation level in our educational system, and therefore needs careful handling and can be compared to the foundation of a high rise building meant for use by human beings. It is therefore imperative to note that any mistake made at this educational foundation is bound to adversely affect the other levels in our educational system - post primary and tertiary levels.

Elementary education is the core of African development even though many African educators would rather give priority to secondary, technical and university education. (Fafunwa, 1980; 31).

The importance attached to primary education in Nigeria made the educational planners to raise the minimum qualification standard of the teachers to Grade II Teachers Certificate at the inception of the Universal (Free) Primary Education (UPE) in 1976.

Crash programmes and in-services training's were hurriedly established all over the country and all sorts of characters from school drop-outs to petty traders and motor touts found their way back to classrooms. The quality of teachers produced became doubtful—oral expression in English was poor, required appropriate teaching methods was lacking in most of them. For instance, in 1990, more than 67.5% of the 45,420 candidates for the Grade II Teachers Certificate Examination in the country failed (Editorial Comment Daily Star, 1991) NTI source.

The emerging poor standard of the teachers prompted the Federal Government to come up with a decision to make National Certificate of Education (NCE) the minimum qualification of teachers in our primary school system with effect from 1998/1999 session before the "proverbial year 2000" which guarantees education for all and sundry.

Education is very necessary as life saving machine for it is through education, whether formal or informal, that the average citizen will be helped to cope adequately with the average citizen will be helped to cope adequately with the problems of meeting his basic needs; food, shelter, clothing, to maintain good health, to learn how to manage his own economic affairs, and his role as a citizen in the community and his part in family life (Fafunwa, 1980).

This paper therefore sets out to address problems of managing primary education as regards funding, financing, manpower needs, professional competencies and entry qualifications of teachers e.t.c suggestions and recommendations are hereby also given for the betterment of primary education in the country.

Funding and financing of Primary Education in Nigeria

The harsh economic recession that came with the "oil doom" has tremendously affected the educational funding and financing. This has adverse effect not only on the goals that are to be achieved, but also the efficiency with which they are achieved at the primary school level.

It is important to distinguish between the two concepts of funding and financing:

Funding refers to the provision of cash in bulk for promotion of human and material resources in education while Financing refers to the provision of cash in addition to other facilities that only can be interpreted to mean cash materials and resources.

The issue of funding and financing primary education in the country had all along being a hard nut to crack since pre-independence years. A brief history will elaborate this.

Precisely on January 7, 1955, the defunct regional government in western region joined the league of education conscious governments of the world, when it launched a gigantic and ambitious free Universal Primary Education Scheme within its areas of governance. This noble idea was copied by the Eastern Regional Government in 1956-57. Almost every family grasped the free primary education opportunity

provided by the two regional governments and consequently, enrolment figure shot up to unimaginable level. According to the works of Ugokwe (1994) and Olayiwola (1988). "In the Western Region, the number of pupils jumped from 457,000 at the planning stage in 1954 to 811,000 the following year and over 1,080,303 in 1959, representing 77% increase, while the teaching staff increased from 17,000 to 27,000 between 1954 to 1955. Government expenditure on education increased from £2.2 million to £5.4 million, representing a rise in government expenditure on education from 34% of the total budget in 1954 to 47% in 1955. It was this high cost of the scheme that forced the government to modify its policy to exclude the element of compulsory education in the scheme". They also went further to state that. "In the case of the Eastern Region, the government was greatly embarrassed as enrolment shot through the roofs from 775,000 pupils in 1956 to 1,209,167 in 1957 an increase of almost 80%. Many of the 11,000 additional teachers recruited for the scheme were not trained nor qualified for the job and the recurrent expenditure for primary education shot up from £2 million to £4.5 million. Before the end of 1958, the government was obliged to re-introduce fees in higher classes, thereby admitting the failure of the scheme."

At the National level, the UPE scheme was announced in January 1974 at Sokoto by the erstwhile Head of State, Yakubu Gowon at an official engagement. Between 1974 and 1976 when the scheme eventually took off, the government had constructed 25,000 new classrooms and trained 97,000 additional teachers.

Money was also provided on the basis of the estimated populations to the various states for equipment and free supply of books. When the school year started in September 1976, 8.3 million and not the projected pupils turned up for registration. By 1983, when the programme went awry, pupils in the nation's primary schools numbered 16.5 million. (Ugekwe, 1994).

In 1971, the Yakubu Gowon administration mandated the Somade Commission to study how feasible the issue of free universal and compulsory primary education was in Nigeria within a foreseeable future. According to Tai Solarin (1989 Newspaper article), against all odds, the commission came out with an popular verdict that primary education free, universal but NOT compulsory was feasible only in 1980.

In the present day situation, the chaotic nature of the nation's primary schools, is beyond description. Classrooms are not sufficient, the available ones collapse regularly, classes are regularly held under shades of trees etc.

To ensure adequate funding and financing of primary education, the federal government at various times set up three committees on Primary Education funding viz: Orewa Committee on the funding of primary education, chief A. Y. Eke. Presidential commission and Onabamiro Committee on alternative sources of funding education (Olayiwola, 1988). The Pius Okigbo Committee of revenue allocation vested the funding and financing of primary education on State and Local Governments.

With the emergence of corrupt civilian administration during the inept

government of Shehu Shagari, local governments share of the federation account made to state administration never got to the local governments, it ended up with the state governments and funding of primary education was almost stalled. Other avenues of generating funds by local governments which might be used to finance primary education were equally hijacked by the states thereby impoverishing the local governments.

Due to Fafunwa's Commission's report of 1983, the National Council on Education agreed to the Federal Government second coming in 1989 into primary education funding. A decree to this effect was promulgated to back it up— "This in cushioning the burden which state and local government have been battling with, the Federal Government will henceforth annually contribute 65% of the calculated cost of primary school personal salaries. The percentage will be deducted from source i.e. the Federal Government share of the federal account, and put in a fund christened "The National Primary Education Fund". 20% of the contribution will be kept aside regularly for a period of 10 years for the educationally disadvantaged states identified by the federal government for the purpose of primary education development. 80% of the fund deducted from the federal government share of the federal account will be shared among all the states plus Abuja, while 20% will be shares only among the educationally disadvantaged states.

In view of the importance of the joint participation of all tiers to the success of the funding policy, it is envisaged that each state shall set aside its own contribution to which the federal government will add its own. Similarly, each local government will set aside its own contribution to which the joint federal and state fund will be added".

The poor funding has also led to virtual absence of most basic needs in our primary schools – no useable chalkboards, no chalks at times, no teaching aids, irregular payment of teachers salaries e.t.c.

Teachers turned to farming and commercial cab driving to fend for a living. With persistent dwindling resources, consequence upon the "oil doom", primary education in Nigeria took a head-on plunge for the rocks.

Despite this traumatic condition, parents still manage to squeeze out from their meagre resources to get their children and ward educated. Some parents even dispose off some of their properties to raise money for their children's education. But the insensitive government dashed their hope of educating the children by imposing expensive and ridiculous school fees in the name of "levies".

Since 1988, the country as a whole has witnessed various educational endowments and trust fund launchings on various scales of Federal, States, Local Governments, towns, communities e.t.c. in support of government funding of our educational system.

Civil servants yearly pay educational levies and so also, industries and factories send part of their annual profits into the education trust fund of the respective local governments they operate in for supportive purposes.

Against a backdrop of population explosion, financial crisis and austerity all of which have an adverse effect on education budgets in Nigeria and other third world nations, the implementation of literacy programme will be a race against time, attempting to bridge the widening gap between educational needs and available resources.

Manpower Training and Professional Competencies

According to Olaitan (1994), "efficient manpower is the pivot of development, therefore, no educational programme be it technical or otherwise should start until the minimum manpower need of the programme is made available". He went further to analyse the qualities of competent and efficient manpower thus:

- (a) Ability to efficiently impart knowledge and skills to the students.
- (b) Ability to operate machines and equipment efficiently.
- (c) Ability to effectively use available tools for training.
- (d) Ability to supervise well.
- (e) Ability to evaluate learning outcomes.

The National Policy on Education (1981 Revised edition) clearly states that "primary education is given in an institution for children aged normally 6 to 11 years plus". Since the rest of the educational system is build upon it, the primary level is the key to the success or failure of the whole system.

For the realisation of the general objectives as spelt out in the policy, proper attention must be paid to efficient manpower training to make the laudable programmes achievable in all its ramifications.

In pursuance of these, we must have at the back of our mind some traditional theories in vocational education which stress the need for capable and efficient manpower needs.

According to Agusiobo (1988), theory 7 states; "Vocational education will be effective in proportion as the instructor has had successful experience in the application of skills and knowledge to the operations and processes he undertakes to teach". Theory 8 states; "for every occupation there is a minimum of productive ability which an individual must posses in order to secure or retain employment in that occupations. If vocational education is not carried to that point with that individual, it is neither personally nor socially effective".

From the above theories, it is pertinent to note that detailed specific training needs are necessary for the inculcation of knowledge into pupils in our school system for the realisation of our set objectives nationally.

There can be no excellence in education without first rate teachers "one can change the curriculum, refurbish the physical environment, increase the school days but without good teachers, change will never produce the desired effect" (Miller & Rose, 1975; Henson 1988).

The success of primary education depends on the quality of its teachers in

terms of professional qualification and appropriate teaching methods. Both are conspicuously lacking in our own case in the country.

According to Fafunwa (1980), "The average African parent still believes that the child is to be seen not heard.... The child meets with even more rigorous resistance at the elementary school level, if he is ever lucky enough to see the inside of a school. The teacher, who in many instances is either untrained or unsure or both, covers up his own ignorance by slapping down the eager child instead of giving him as much encouragement as he can". There is need to improve the quality of primary school teachers to meet up with the high demand of present day education. Citing the opinion of Pullias and young (1977), Ajibade (1987) wrote:

"Teaching is many things. The teacher is many Persons. Teaching is sometimes instructing, explaining or telling, yet very little can be taught in this sense. Teaching is waiting, but there is a time for action. Teaching involves demands...."

The teacher must understand the pupils' background to be able to analyse different situations and must be able to transform his wealth of experience into concepts that have meanings to his pupils and must be above board and act as a model to all.

In realising the modern demands of primary education to the national development, the federal government decided to abolish the 'Teachers' Grade II Schools all over the federation and make National Certificates of Education (Primary) as the minimum qualification for teachers with effect from 1998/99 session. This is no longer feasible in the present dispensation.

In line with this policy, the Lagos State Government pioneered the establishment of a specialised College of Primary Education in December 1994 in Nigeria. The implication of the government policy is that in the near future, NCE graduates not specialising in primary education may become jobless as there may be no employment opportunity for them in the secondary education as spelt out in the Revised National Policy on Education.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The greatest single operational problem in the way of primary education in the country is inadequate funding. According to Ulinfun (1993), "This problem has becomes a hydra headed monster that can not be conquered by the government quarterly subventions.

When little funds are even made available, management of same becomes a serious problem. This paper sets out to suggest the followings as a way out of our present predicament:-

- The country should have a complete monopoly of all primary schools and such should be in turn well financed by the state. It must be free, compulsory and universal for all Nigerian children of age.

- Missions, voluntary agencies and private individuals should be encourage to strictly follow laid down rules and regulations governing the establishment of schools in terms of staffing, infrastructures, syllabus e.t.c.
- Salaries and allowances of teachers should be promptly paid as at when due unlike the present backlog system of payment. Education for sometimes in the country has been very epileptic because of industrial strikes and political upheavals as a result of poor working conditions. This should be carefully looked into by creating special budgetary vote to cater for teachers pay.
- Regular in-service training for teachers, headmasters, supervisors and inspectors of schools should be encouraged and remunerated accordingly with promotions to deserving winners and participants.
- Nigeria should be perceived as one united entity and all policies relating to primary education should be based in that direction instead of introducing factors such ass religion, quota, state of origin, location, political association e.t.c.
- The government should look at the possibility of establishing a National Pre-Primary Education Commission which will give a focus upon which the present National Primary Education Commission will work on to lay a solid foundation.

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