



MANAGEMENT OF FREE AND COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NORTH – WEST ZONE, NIGERIA: MYTHS AND LOCAL REALITIES.

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Abstract

This paper examines the provision and management of free and compulsory primary education program in North – west zone of Nigeria. Two research objectives guided the conduct of the study. Literature on historical antecedents of primary education, problems and challenges experienced along the journey, current trends and other related issues are reviewed. The study discovers that; inadequate funding, rapid expansion in enrolment figures, poor infrastructure and inadequate facilities, ineffective supervision, inadequate data for planning, brain-drain and proliferation of poor quality teachers and insecurity are among the foremost hitches militating against effective management of free and compulsory primary education program in North – west zone. It is based on these findings that improving community participation in the management of public primary education through school – based management committees and PTA, and patronizing school – based staff developmental programs, among others are recommended for improvement.

Keywords: free and compulsory, primary education, myths, realities, prospects.

Introduction

Education forms the basis for literacy and skills acquisition, scientific and technological advancement, economic prosperity, as well as the means to combat unemployment, insecurity and the foundation of social equity. The vision of education is to produce intelligent and competitive human beings. Human intelligence includes spiritual intelligence, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, intellectual intelligence and kinesthetic intelligence. Grounded on this believe, various government in Nigeria and international actors had at different times made frantic efforts in reinvigorating the primary education sub-sector in Nigeria, by expansion of schools and increasing the number of children enrolled to be assured of having a bright future ahead of them, (Salihu and Jamil, 2015). But, repositioning, and revitalizing an enormous and intrinsic system that has been in operation for close to two century, such as primary education in a country with a colossal economy, but yet fast growing population like Nigeria, is undoubtedly herculean and perplexing.

As the first formal stage of education, primary education is an institution upon which all other levels of education and educational achievements are built. It is an essential component in the echelon of educational system of every nation, and a pre-requisite for human and national development, because it provides young learners with the fundamentals of reading, writing, skill acquisition, information and

attitudes necessary for proper adjustment in to the society, thereby prepares the mind and trains the child for higher and tougher academic pursuits, (NPE, 2013). As such, primary education in the context of Nigerian education industry is vital in position, vast in size, multi-dimensional in function, value-loaded in prospect and technical in operation. Obviously, the primary education in Nigeria was administered by different sets of managers ranging from the Christian missionaries (1843-1882), the colonial government (1882-1940's) and the regional governments (1950's). Since, independence in 1960, the federal, state and local governments have played significant roles in the administration of primary education.

Conceptually, 'free education' means that no child, other than a child who was admitted by his/her parents to a school which is not supported by the appropriate government, shall be liable to pay any kind of fee or charges which may prevent him/her from pursuing and completing primary education. While, 'Compulsory education' casts an obligation on the appropriate authorities to provide conducive and supportive atmosphere that would ensure enrollment, attendance and completion of primary education by all children in the ages 6 – 14. Apparently however, the resources with which primary education sub – sector would hopefully be reshaped toward redefined priorities are mostly over stretched and dwindling, posing formidable challenges to the operation of the system. On the basis of these expositions, this paper examines some of the problems and challenges blockading effective management of free and compulsory primary education program in North – west zone of Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The study was set to;

1. Determine the problems and challenges in the management of free and compulsory primary education in north – west zone, Nigeria.
2. Outline possible solution to the problems and challenges in the management of free and compulsory primary education in north – west zone, Nigeria.

A PRECIS ON THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

The history of western primary education in Nigeria could be traced to the efforts of the Christian missions. Although Fafunwa (1981) affirms that, "the missionaries without exception used the school as a means of conversion". But, there is no doubt that the schools established during these periods served as a springboard for the emergence of nationalized government schools. The first primary school in Nigeria was established at Badagry, Lagos in 1842. The missionaries, despite financial and structural difficulties as well as the challenges of acceptance they experienced, were able to make the system stand on its feet due to absolute perseverance and uphill struggle they demonstrated as well as the management techniques applied.

Fafunwa (1981) postulates that, "up to 1882, the colonial government in Nigeria paid little or no attention to the educational needs of the people, and the field was left entirely to the missionaries. It was recorded that, in 1914 when northern and southern protectorates were amalgamated to form the Nigerian state, there were only about 150 government elementary schools, (Idris, 2023). Accordingly, Abdullahi (2014) observes that, the northern region of Nigeria was divided on the basis of religion, the predominantly

Muslim area and the non-muslim area. In the predominately Muslim area, the Muslims felt very strongly that western education was the key to white man's power of conversion to Christianity and therefore view the school as an activity of the Church. Grounded on this belief, western education was vigorously resisted. Thus, primary education development here was essentially by the colonial government, and emirs' support was vigorously sought by the colonial government. The provincial schools for Kano, Sokoto and Katsina alike were later established with an average attendance of 733 pupils by the end of 1915. In the non–muslim dominated area, missionaries participated actively in the establishment and administration of primary schools. Thus by 1916 there were 58 mission schools with an average of 933 pupils in attendance.

Consequently, the participation of colonial and independent governments in the management of primary education saw a great number of modifications and developments. Ordinances, decrees, acts and constitutional provisions and declarations were introduced, promulgated and implemented to give primary education a popular perspective. Educational management boards, education ministries, agencies and other administrative machinery have also been instituted at various government levels. Policies and programs of different dimensions were launched to meet the ever increasing demand for primary education. Indeed, primary education saw proliferation of a number of alternating management agencies and boards such as; District Education Committees, School Boards, Local Education Authority, Primary School management Board, National Primary Education Commission, Universal Basic Education Commission and a host of other agencies.

In the same vein a great number of commissions and committees were appointed to study the prevailing situations of primary education and proffer viable recommendations that would improve its quality. These include; Phelps-Stokes mission for Africa (1920 – 24, Education of African communities of 1935, Mass Education in African Society of 1944, Ashby Commission of 1959 and so on. Other worth noting developments that led to expansion and therefore more challenges to the management of primary education include the introduction of Universal primary education scheme in 1976, Universal basic education in 1999 and free and compulsory education in 2019. These and similar other efforts put together brought primary education to the current situation we both cherish and criticize.

CURRENT TRENDS, MYTHS AND REALITIES

The current scenario in the provision and management of free and compulsory primary education in North – west Nigeria is quite weighty and demanding, considering not only the vastness of the primary education, but also the laudable goals it is set to accomplish. According to section 2 (c) items 19 of the National Policy on Education (2013 as revised) the cardinal objectives of primary education are to

- a. Inculcate permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively;
- b. Lay a sound basis for scientific, critical and reflective thinking;
- c. Promote patriotism, fairness, understanding and national unity;
- d. Instill social, moral norms and values in the child;
- e. Develop in the child the ability to adapt to the changing environment and
- f. Provide opportunity for the child to develop life manipulative skills that will enable him/her functions

effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capability.

Thus, for the management of this policy program to accomplish the stated objectives, concerted efforts must be mustered to sail the ship out of the crux and possible wreckage. In fact, a critical look at the program today, it is obvious that numerous multidimensional problems bedeviled its' effective implementation in north – west zone, considering the following factors among others;

Inadequate Funding

Constitutionally, the federal government takes the lead in setting the policy and financing primary education through transfers to State, while the financial responsibility of primary education is shared between the states and local governments. Local governments are saddled with the responsibility of paying salaries and allowances of teachers, while states are expected to provide adequate structures as in classrooms, libraries and other necessary facilities. However, in spite of the shared responsibility for financing primary education scheme by the three – tiers of government, funding has remained a big issue. Nigeria's education financing in the recent decades has always fall below the international acceptable standard of 26% of the gross domestic product, (GDP). Nigeria's budget to education (primary education inclusive) in 2026 was 9%.

Population Explosion

The lunch of free and compulsory primary education program has boost pupils' enrolment unprecedentedly. Although, recent government report has revealed that, there are over eight (8) million out of school children in Nigeria and north – west zone accounted for the majority of these out of school children with (3, 490, 671), yet the zone accounted for highest number of pupils' enrolment in recent years. It therefore become a stale assertion to state that, primary schools in the area, especially those located in urban and semi urban centers are overcrowded depicting a situation in which a classroom that was meant to accommodate 35 – 40 pupils is now sheltering over 100 pupils. School size has grown beyond elastic limit to the extent that some schools have more than 2000 students and more than 100 teachers leading to the school attendance shift system of morning and afternoon. The attendant consequences of this overcrowded nature of the public primary schools are obviously over stretching the already inadequate and decayed educational facilities and dearth of teaching staff. The education data summary by the federal government (2022 – 2024 academic sessions) shows that, there are 10, 982, 905 children enrolled in to public primary schools in north –west zone, while the number of qualified teachers teaching in those schools stands at one hundred and fifty – seven thousand, five hundred and fifty – four (157, 554) only.

The quandary as could be deduced is the large shortfall between the number of qualified teachers required to man this hefty number of pupils and teachers on ground, and going by the approved Teacher – Pupils Ratio (TPR) of 1 – 35 as contained in the National Policy on Education, (NPE, 2013). Mere calculation will indicates a deficit of one hundred and fifty – six thousand, two hundred and forty – four (156, 244) qualified teachers who would sufficiently meet the demand. Apparently, the vital questions are how and when the states and local government in north – west zone would be able to fill the vacancy by employing sufficient qualified primary school teachers to meet this obvious shortfall considering their financial statuses?

Poor infrastructure and inadequate facilities

Poor funding has lead to acute shortage of quality educational resource both human and material. According to Idris, (2023) one of the ways to assess the effectiveness of an education scheme is to look at the availability of infrastructures needed for its successful

implementation. He noted that infrastructure such as classrooms, books, and other learning materials are very insufficient to meet the goals of education, and to ensure access by every child. He further asserts that, "It will be impossible for the curriculum to be implemented if the instructional infrastructures and facilities required for teaching and learning are not available. The main instructional infrastructures and facilities in primary schools according to him include the following;

1. Equipment such as sporting equipment, teaching aids, typewriters, photocopiers, computers, etc.
2. Permanent and semi-permanent facilities such as classrooms, staff rooms, staff-quarters, Assembly Halls, administrative blocks, libraries, laboratories, etc.
3. Furniture such as desks, tables, chairs, etc.
4. Books such as textbooks, stationery etc.
5. Vehicles
6. Electrical facilities such as lightning, fans, generating sets, and other electrical fittings.
7. Water supply such as tap water, wells, water tanks etc.

The purpose of such infrastructures and facilities according to Allen (2015) is to lay sound foundation for educational structure in order to achieve educational goals, because they help to protect students and teachers from the sun, rain, heat and cold and enhances the comfort, safety of students and teachers, thereby increasing their performances. It therefore, becomes necessary to ensure that such plant is properly planned and maintained to facilitate the effectiveness of school system. The situation at which most of the public primary schools that host the free and compulsory primary education program in north – west zone is quite disgusting characterized by decayed and dilapidated infrastructures, unhealthy toilets facilities, lack of clean water supply and a host of other problems that could easily send away children from such filthy school environment. Statistics from the education data summary 2022 - 2024 sessions had indicated that, a staggering fifty – six thousand, eight hundred and three (56, 803) classrooms in north – west zone are in bad condition and therefore not conducive for teaching and learning. In addition, the situation is same with instructional materials which are grossly inadequate to warrant effective inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy in the children. For instance, the above quoted statistics has revealed that, the total number of English, mathematics and basic science textbooks per pupil is 0.29 in public primary schools of north – west zone. These problems as outlined could easily jeopardize the quality of education received under such conditions.

Ineffective supervision

For quite some time, scholars and analysts in Nigerian educational administration have been agitating against the poor quality of primary schools' supervision, describing the exercises as unprofessional and below the expected standard. Idris (2023) observed that, schools in the north - west zone are not frequently visited by the supervisors from Ministry of Education and when supervision is done, it is far from being thorough. Inspection reports are hardly made available and there are no follow-up that would ensure that the weaknesses identified have been corrected. Major reasons for such ineffectiveness according to him, are inadequate resources, gradual declined in quantitative and qualitative personnel, unprecedented expansion of schools and teachers' population and insecurity.

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2013 revised) has expressed resolve not only to establish inspectorate services, but also make it functional and efficient at federal, States and local government levels for maintaining uniform standard at all levels of

education below the tertiary level. But the question that lingers, is how efficient are they? It is worthy to mention that, the goals of education can only be achieved with a well organized school system that would ensure that all aspects of school activities are well articulated and effectively coordinated. As such, there is urgent need for regular checks and balances through effective instructional supervision.

Inadequate Data for Planning

Similarly, inadequate and poor data base pose planning difficulties and implementation challenges to the free and compulsory primary education program in north – west zone. Unreliable data prevent adequate projections in terms of expected enrolment, required teachers, infrastructural needs and equipment. According to Asodike and Ikpitibo, (2014) huge disparity exists between expected school enrolment and the actual enrolment figure. This leads to difficulties in accurately planning and allocating the available human, material and financing resources adequately to various public primary schools. When data provided for planning is inaccurate, the decision based on such data would be faulty, (Anaduaka and Okafor, 2019).

Brain Drain and proliferation of poor quality teachers

Furthermore, for decades there has been public outcry about the rate at which well trained and academically sound teachers are abandoning the classrooms for what is termed more “lucrative jobs” due to poor condition of service in the teaching profession. This ugly situation gives room for the in-coming of unqualified people in to the teaching job. Between 2015 – 2023 Nigeria has experienced an unprecedented surge in brain drain driven by economic instability, hyperinflation, widespread insecurity and poor work conditions, this mass exodus saw hundreds of thousands of highly skilled professionals, particularly in health and education sectors migrate to Europe, America, Asia and other African countries. Ojimba in Idris (2024) had identified five different component of brain drain in the education sector:

1. Professional teachers who moved to the industries where they get better pay for their services.
2. Professional teachers and students who leave the country to acquire more knowledge and skill, but later refused to return.
3. Professional teachers who abandon the classroom in favor of other more lucrative economic activities and political appointments which are not related with their training.
4. Professional teachers who move out of the country for a better condition of service.
5. Professional teachers, although in the classroom, but who do not devote their full attention to their teaching job because of their effort to supplement their earning through other unrelated economic activities.

Insecurity

The security situation in north - west zone has drastically cripples the educational sector particularly at primary and secondary schools level. Escalating threat from armed bandits and kidnappers targeting students and teachers for ransom has forced indefinite closure of hundreds of primary and secondary schools in an effort to protect learners and staff. Violence from insurgency and banditry destroys educational infrastructures, disrupt academic calendars and deplete government funds meant for educational development, spikes in out of school children and severe psychological trauma leading to reduction in students' enrolment, retention and completion. Akpa – Achimugu and Ibeh (2023) reported that, over 200 primary and secondary schools were indefinitely closed across; Kaduna, Katsina,

Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states leading to a significant educational disruption.

Other worth noting problems and challenges facing the management of free and compulsory primary education in north – west zone include the lukewarm attitude of the parents towards moral and financial support to primary education, indiscipline among some teachers and students, poverty among others.

Prospects of Free and Compulsory Primary Education Program

Although, there are enormous and complex problems and challenges bedeviling the management of free and compulsory primary education program in the north – west zone, but with perseverance and renewed commitment from all the stakeholders in education history could repeated itself by reviving the old glory with which primary education was known in the 1960s. Taking into cognizance the rate at which our population is fast growing and hence the continue massive demand for education, the pervasive knowledge boom the world is experiencing, the national desire to be among 20 top economies in the world, the incorporation of technological revolution in the teaching – learning process, the national pledge to pursue vigorously the accomplishment of sustainable development goals, (of which universal primary education is a part). One could conclude that, free and compulsory primary education program is very prospective. However, there is urgent need for the managers of this program operating at both school and local education authorities (LEA) to be adequately train to inculcate a more improve technical capability and strategies to enable them confront the envisage future with zeal, optimism and commitment considering the following possible panacea;

- a. ***Dealing with problem of under-funding:*** There is no doubt that, the three tiers of government are blamed for the under-funding of education in general and primary education in particular, yet those managers operating at the school and LEA level should not fold their arms waiting for time when the government will increase the budgetary allocation to primary education. Thus, the need to diversify the means through which more revenue could be generated for the schools. Idris, (2023) opines that revenue yielding projects such as school canteen, bookshops, school farm and the like can serve as other additional sources of fund for the school. The profits drawn from such projects could be use in purchasing school's consumables such as chalk, marker, registers, and brooms etc. In addition, managers should expose pupils to the learning of skills involved in producing domestic utensils like mats, chairs, brooms of various types, ropes cane etc. Finished products could be displayed for sale on exhibition day or sale at market and money realized can be used for school development projects. On this juncture, Educational Secretaries and their management teams should urgently begin to mobilize the head masters in their LEA to patronize these additional sources of revenue to supplement government efforts.
- b. ***Improving Community participation:*** In recent years, there has been an increase in community participation in the delivery of education. Many communities who cannot afford the rising cost of private schools now put their hands on the available public schools in their locality by providing relief materials to them through the establishment of PTA, SBMC and Old Students Associations. It is also worth nothing that, there is an increased awareness from the general public of the enormity of the cost of education, seeing the level of decay

and the pervasive conditions of many public primary schools. To this end philanthropist, private organizations, corporate bodies, community associations are now willing to complement in meaningful terms, the government effort in the provision of education as part of their corporate responsibilities. This will undoubtedly assist the government in the provision of learning facilities and their maintenance in the service of education. For instance, the assisting body will endeavor to ensure that facilities provided are judiciously utilized and or adequately maintained or protected through their appointed monitoring agencies. Primary education managers should also take advantage of this gesture.

- c. **Tackling the problem of brain drain and poor quality teachers:** There has been a clarion call for employers of labour in the country to reconsider employees' take home package to replicate the economic realities of our time. Many professional are dumping the services of the country due to poor condition of service. Furthermore, patronizing the school – based and local government – based professional development programs would for sure assist in tackling the problem of poor quality teachers. Head teachers should be encourage to organize in – house training programs periodically using internal or external resource person to improve the quality of the teachers by upgrading their conceptual knowledge, methodologies and teaching skills in order to adapt to innovative ways of instructional delivery. Ogunneye (2015) observes that, a good, honest, hardworking and visionary manager or administrator will turn a poor school around and give it a good name image.
- d. **Tackling Planning Problems:** Although there seems to be nothing wrong with the Social Demand Approach the country is employing in the educational planning to meet the increasing demand for primary education, the possible obstacle could be the unavailability of reliable data which planners need to enable them make accurate projections and work out financial and other requirements for effective implementation of the plan. Indeed, many analysts were of the opinion that, one of the major problems that led to the collapse of the UPE scheme of 1976 was wrong estimation of the number of pupils to be enrolled in to the program at its take – off due to basing estimation on questionable statistics. Thus, the large turnout of pupils desiring primary education went beyond the prediction which resulted in to shortage of almost everything, teachers, classrooms, infrastructural facilities, instructional materials etc. Thus, in order to avoid re-occurrence of such problems, there is the need proper planning and preparation through regular review and evaluation of the free and compulsory primary education.
- e. **Tackling Insecurity:** The closure of schools by some state governments is seen as an immediate measure in response to the banditry and kidnapping, but it is not a permanent and productive solution. Hence, state and federal governments need to put measures in place to safeguard schools and avoid the occurrence of situations that lead to insecurity. Governments should address the underlying factors that lead to banditry and kidnapping such as poverty and unemployment by providing opportunities and development programs to engage the youth. The presence of security forces in schools in remote areas that are equipped with the tools and skills necessary to deter

attacks will be a welcome measure. There is also the need to foster community-based intelligence networks and encourage local communities to work with security agencies in gathering and sharing information on potential threats, as well as to build trust between security agencies and local communities. The installation of CCTV cameras and alarm systems in schools should also be encouraged. Political-will must also be mustered to ensure that the perpetrators of banditry and kidnapping face justice and are held accountable for their actions.

Conclusion

There is no gain saying the fact that, free and compulsory primary education program is by all means an important process of giving primary education a popular perspective in Nigeria. Although, like same past attempts of UPE and UBE programs, the free and compulsory education program from inception to date has indeed contained itself with both the system and its patronizers moving head on. However, having identified some problems and challenges facing managers and administrators of the program over the years, the outlined prospects could be adequately motivating to put hopes in the resuscitation of its fundamental structures for an improved better performance.

Recommendations

1. The annual budgetary allocation to education by all tiers of government in Nigeria should be increase to the UNESCO's recommendation of 26% country's GDP. This will enable the primary education sub –sector access to more funds to cater the ever increasing demand for primary education.
2. The local communities should be adequately represented and involved in the management of the schools through the establishment of PTA, SBMC and Old Students Associations and participation in school's committees which would enable them have first hand information on what goes on the school
3. Managers and administrators of this all important sub – sector at school and LEA level should develop various motivational techniques such as training, praise and delegation of authority to boost the morale of teachers to give their best in teaching - learning process especially in the area of curriculum and program implementation.
4. There should always be public demand for accountability on the primary school managers and administrators on what goes on in the schools by relevant stakeholders. This will make both the head teachers and the LEA to live up to their responsibilities.

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