

Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (U.B.E.) Policy: A Sociological Analysis

Etuk, Grace Reuben

Department of Sociology
University of Calabar, Calabar
Cross River State, Nigeria

Ering, Simon Odey

Department of Sociology
University of Calabar, Calabar
Cross River State, Nigeria

Ajake, Uchenna Egodi

Institute of Education
University of Calabar, Calabar
Cross River State, Nigeria

Abstract

Nigeria's education policy is one of the social policies of government used in strengthening and improving the wellbeing of her citizens. Since after independence in 1960, successive governments have not relented in efforts to improve the quality of the nation's education system via education policies. This is evident in the most recent national policy on educational of 2004, which is just an improvement upon that of 1998. A look at the current educational policy shows that it covers the following areas; pre-primary education, primary education, secondary education, tertiary education, mass literacy, adult and non-formal education, special education, educational services as well as financing administration, and supervision of education. A special feature of this current educational policy is however the modification of the 6-3-3-4 system of education into a 9-3-4 system and the Universal Basic Education, which caters for educational needs of individual within the first 9 years. This paper is a descriptive research that attempts to critically analyze from a Sociological perspective, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) aspect of the reviewed Nigeria's Policy on Education of 2004.

Key Words: Education Policy, Basic Education

Introduction

In line with Millennium Development goals (MDGs), the Federal Government of Nigeria launched a new educational policy in 2004, which has among other features, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. The primary target of the UBE aspect of this new educational policy was ensuring that every Nigerian child acquires a minimum of 9 years basic education. Given the unstable and consequently unreliable socioeconomic realities in Nigeria, one cannot but wonder how far the UBE programme can go in meeting its target and achieving its set objectives. In every society, including the very advanced ones of Europe and America, education has remained the major social structure for capacity building. As such if Nigeria must compete favourably with other societies in today's globalized world in the area of skilled manpower capable of effecting desired societal change, the issue of education must be accorded utmost priority. Given that basic education provides the foundation for any educational pursuit, it becomes necessary for the basic education programme to be given fundamental attention.

A Background of Educational Policy in Nigeria

Education is the process of acquiring new values and skills for the purpose of effective functioning in the society. It involves a pedagogical process, which if properly carried out should lead to the maturing of the person who has received it, to the extent that he is in a position to think and act meaningfully and in relevant interaction with members of society to their mutual benefit (Dickson1985).

In the views of Adepaju (2007) education is tool for the acquisition of skills, relevant knowledge and habits for surviving in the changing world. As such in every society, the education sector stands as a medium through which positive transformation could be achieved. The place of education in national development cannot be overstressed. Its importance is stressed in the opening statement of the National policy of education (2004) where it is maintained that “education in Nigeria is an instrument ‘par excellence’ for effecting national development” In other words, education is not just a medium of knowledge and skill acquisition, It is also a tool for nation building.

Historically, formal education in Nigeria can be traced to the advent and activities of European Missionaries and Colonialists. However, the scope of education in Nigeria during this era was not only narrow, it also lacked a properly defined focus. To make education have a definable focus, a national policy on education became extremely necessary in Nigeria. This need became even more pressing following the National Curriculum Conference in 1969, where experts in the field of education expressed dissatisfaction with the then existing education systems, which had become irrelevant to national needs, aspirations and goals. After the conference, a follow up seminar of experts in this regard was convened in 1973. The out come was a draft document, the final of which became the national policy on education first published in 1977. In 1981 as well as 1998 the policy was revised.

The important features of Nigeria’s Education policy as at 1998 are its outline of a philosophy for the country’s education, promotion of the teaching of Nigerian languages, introduction of guidelines and counseling in schools diversified curriculum with prevocational and vocational technical subjects. (Vanguard, May 25 2006). This particular policy was also characterized by a 6-3-3-4 educational structure, which required that an average Nigerian child would spend a minimum of 6 years in primary school, 3 years in junior secondary school, 3 years in senior secondary school and minimum of 4 years in the university.

In 2004, the National Policy on education was revisited and revised. Although this latest policy incorporated the features of the previous one, the 2004 policy had a few new additions, the most outstanding being the 9-3-4 education structure, backed up by the Universal Basic Education. The 9-3-4 structure requires 9 years of basic education, (which combines 6 years of primary and 3 years of junior secondary education) 3 years of senior secondary education and a minimum of 4 years of university education.

The Universal Basic Education Policy of 2004

The vision of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is that at the end of 9 years of continuous education, every child should have acquired appropriate and relevant skills and values and be employable in order to contribute his/her quota to national development. The UBE act of 2004 covers;

- Early child care development and education (ECCDE)
- Six years of primary Education
- Three years of junior secondary education. (Tahir, 2006)

Furthermore, the guideline for the implementation of U.B.E. outlined the targets of the policy as follows:

- Ensuring that school-age children are in school.
- 100% transition to JSS at the end of six years of primary education.
- Completers of Basic Education to possess literacy, numeracy and basic life skills, as well as ethical moral and civic values.
- All teachers in Basic Education institutions to possess the Nigerian certificate of education.
- Review of basic education curriculum to conform to the reform agenda.
- Achievement of 100% awareness on HIV/AIDS in schools.
- Establishment of an effective institutional framework for monitoring learning and teaching.
- Active involvement in and participation and eventual ownership of schools by local communities (www.ubec.gov.ng)

The U.B.E. Policy: A Sociological Analysis

A close examination of the UBE programme shows that it is a noble policy by government especially when one considers its objectives. What more could a developing society like Nigeria desire in terms of education, than to have all its school age children be in school? If one considers the fact that education is a veritable tool for advancing any nation, especially a developing one like Nigeria, then one can conclude that the UBE programme is worth executing since its aim is to empower future leaders educationally, for the purpose of advancing the country.

However, while we accept that the UBE programme is worth executing, especially going by its objectives and scope, it is also important to point out that there are some identified problems that should be tackled. This particular aspect of the current policy on education never took into consideration the current realities of Nigeria's socio-economic and already existing educational conditions.

First, there is the problem of dearth of qualified teachers to adequately handle educational needs arising from the expansion of the previously existing educational structure. Most primary schools lack qualified teachers. Commenting on this Adenipekun (2006) pointed out that the problem of lack of teachers in primary schools affects 85% of the States in Nigeria (Vanguard Newspaper, Thursday, May 25th, 2006). The argument is, if most primary schools in the Federation lack qualified hands, how then can they adequately accommodate pupils of the junior secondary category who under the 9-3-4 system of the U.B.E. policy would now become integral part of the primary schools? The problem of lack of and unskilled teachers will affect pupils to the extent that they will pass out without being equipped with the required educational skills that match with that level of education. At the end the objective of having completers of the Universal Basic Education to possess literacy and basic life skill will be defeated.

Furthermore, some work environments do not encourage study leave, and for some that give such room, often it is without pay or other financial incentives that facilitate furthering of education by staff. This condition deters self improvement among teachers and further complicates the problem of lack of skill among them. Many of them will thus continue with their old skills, which may not completely meet demands of the UBE policy.

Studies have shown that adequate motivation is a precondition for the achievement of maximum output in any work environment. Related to the problems of dearth of teachers is the issue of lack of motivation and incentives for teachers. Adepoju and Fabiyi (2007) report that in three demographic studies on the existing national situation in the primary education sector, results showed that almost all sampled teachers indicated they were poorly motivated. How can the goals of UBE be excellently achieved when teachers, whose positions are central to the achievement of such goals, are poorly motivated? Commenting on the state of teachers in Nigeria, Olor (2005) stressed that teaching profession in Nigeria is accorded low regard and often treated as dumping ground. Today Nigerian children hardly aspire to become teachers. This is obviously due to the poor nature of teachers' motivation and remuneration in Nigeria. To say the least, a number of people currently on teaching jobs are only there because they have little or no other job options. Some of them are simply marking time, waiting to take their leave immediately an opportunity for one of the 'green pastures' shows up. This does not exclude those who studied education in tertiary institutions. This makes for brain-drain in the teaching sector and is still traceable to poor and sometimes absence of motivation. This is a major set back for the overall goals of the current education policy.

Another major challenge the current education policy is confronted with is the issue of inadequate facilities and infrastructure. A number of Primary schools in Nigeria are characterized by limited resources, overcrowded class rooms and dilapidated buildings (Olor, 2005) It is not in dispute that in some primary schools, some pupils learn under trees. Three demographic studies on the existing national situation in the primary education sector revealed that 12% of primary school pupils sit on the floor, 38% of classrooms have no ceilings, 87% of classrooms are overcrowded, while 77% of pupils lack textbooks (Adepoju and Fabiyi 2007). The crucial question is; given such pitiable circumstances, can such primary schools adequately fulfill the goals of UBE? In reality, such schools would have a significant proportion of their pupils studying under harsh conditions of sun, rain and other weather conditions. How much can teachers really teach and how much can the pupils themselves learn under in the face off sun, rain and similar environmental conditions? If the teacher is unable to teach well and the pupil is unable to learn well, what quality of pupils will the UBE programme raise for the future?

The programme will no doubt churn out individuals who are not equipped enough to fill various specialized occupational roles, which is what education according to Durkheim as cited in Giddens (2006) is supposed to achieve. An important feature of the current policy on education is that of diversified curriculum with pre-vocational and vocational/technical subjects. While we acknowledge this aspect of the UBE programme as commendable, it must be noted that most schools in the country especially the ones located in the rural areas are plagued with very poor infrastructural facilities. In addition, there is insufficient provision for introductory technology and modern information technology facilities. The effect of this is that UBE will produce pupils who are not only ill-equipped in terms of skill but also suffer from a condition Giddens (2006) described as information poverty. If this is then the case, can the goals of equipping pupils with vocational/technical skills during their training in school be achieved? This is a question of our educational policy makers need to consider answering.

Achieving 100% success in ensuring that all school-age children are in school has been identified as one the goals of UBE. The realization of these goals is however seriously challenged by the phenomenon of child labour. A good number of Nigerian children are trapped in child labour, particularly the type described in Charles, Ikoh, Iyamba, and Charles(2006) as househelpship or domestic labour. As are result of poverty, a number parents as Oloko (1990) revealed, send their children to either serve as domestic help i.e. house helps/domestic servants or hawkers, just to supplement family income. Charles et al (2006) even stressed that more parents have become involved in engaging children in child labour because of the high pay it yields to them. For the children caught up in child labour, what hope is there that they will acquire basic education? Besides, if these categories of children are kept out of the basic education scene, again, what hope is there that all school age children will indeed be in school? Actions need to be expedited to strengthened already existing poverty alleviation programmes, with a view to empowering parents financially, to be able meet up with basic financial demands of the basic education programme which itself is not entirely free. Parents would also need to be enlightened, to step up their enthusiasm towards their children's education. Unless these steps are taken, rather than achieving 100% success in having all school age children in school, the Nigerian society will rather have these particular category of children deprived of upward mobility due to lack of education (Burra, 1990), with some growing up to become societal dregs and economic liabilities due to child labour (Bala, 1988 cited in Charles, et al 2006).

Corruption is another monster that challenges the UBE programme. A number of public office holders in Nigeria are more minded about amassing wealth to themselves than painstakingly doing their jobs. Government has taken giant strides in certain key areas of the educational system, including the UBE sector, however, a lot of mismanagement is observed especially in the area of funds allocated to the programme. Instead of judiciously using such funds to execute the projects they are meant for, public office holders would prefer to divert some of such funds. Some officials at UBE offices, just like others in public offices across the country would delay and even deny a teacher access to services if the teacher does not 'tip' them. They often claim that the teachers file is missing. But the file comes out as soon as they are 'tipped'. This corrupt attitude on the part of such office holders discourage these teachers and create of unnecessary bottle necks and even outright hindrances to the furtherance of issues that will make for the success of the UBE programme. The problem of general corruption poses a major threat to the present educational policy and must be decisively dealt with if the UBE programme must yield dividends.

Recommendations and Conclusion

There is no doubt that the current Universal Basic Education is a major improvement on the previous one. However, one thing to create such policies, it is an entirely different thing to implement and execute them. The policy has been put in place and government seems determined to pursue its implementation and execution. The successful implementation and execution of the UBE programme rests largely on the readiness of government to address the lapses so far identified. This paper thus recommends that as the key player in the UBE programme, government should ensure that:

- funds meant for the execution of the programme are effectively utilized and monitored
- adequate infrastructure and facilities are provided even to the very grassroots
- only qualified and skilled teachers are recruited
- teachers are exposed to frequent training and re-training
- adequate remuneration and motivation are provided for teachers

In addition, government should strengthen its poverty alleviation strategies, as well as involve private sector and community participation in the basic education programme. Finally, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), Education Trust Fund (ETF), Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), Federal Ministry of Education must be part of the drive to the UBE programme a major success story. If issues raised so far raised are looked into, and the recommendations religiously followed, then the current policy on education will be in the direction of the intended success.

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