

ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: ISSUES OF RELEVANCE, QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY

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Abstract

The paper discusses the achievement of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria. It gives particular attention to the extent to which the government is making progress towards the realization of UBE. It also highlights the issues of relevance, quality and efficiency in the UBE programme. The various efforts the governments have made towards the realization of UBE by the year 2015 in terms of quality and relevance of the programme were highlighted. An examination of the various studies and reports on UBE in Nigeria, was made and based on the findings, it was concluded that unless the government places more emphasis and efforts on the issues of relevance and quality, the internal efficiency of the UBE programme will continue to be weak, making the realization of UBE a mirage. The paper concludes with suggestions that will ensure reduction in dropout rates and higher efficiency in the UBE system.

Introduction

The development of any nation depends mainly on inputs made by her citizens. The quality of input depends to a large extent on the percentage of the population with a level of education adequate enough for rapid economic and social development. The Nigerian government introduced the Universal Primary Education (UPE) as an educational programme aimed at eradicating illiteracy, ignorance and poverty, and thereby simulate and accelerate national development. The programme was introduced into the country in 1999 in conformity with the Education for all (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as an integral part of poverty reduction strategy. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) came as a replacement of the UPE scheme of 6-3-3-4 system (six years of primary education, three years of Junior Secondary, three years of Senior Secondary and four years of Tertiary Education. It involves six years of tuition free primary education and three years of free Junior Secondary Education. This entails 9 years of free uninterrupted schooling for every Nigerian child of school age. The UBE is free, compulsory and a right for all Nigerian children and it has the following as its specific objectives:

- To develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
- To provide free, compulsory Universal Basic Education for all Nigeria children of school age, including children of pastoral normal and migrant fisher men.
- To reduce dropout rates from the formal education system, through improved relevance and efficiency.

- To sure the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning (FGN 2004).

To be able to achieve these objectives, the Nigerian government established the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) with the responsibility of ensuring:

- Proper data collection and accurate statistical analysis.
- Prudent management of funds.
- Effective planning, monitoring and evaluation.
- Provision of relevant curricula and adequate infrastructural facilities.
- Procurement of text books and other infrastructural materials
- Recruitment, training and re-training of teachers.
- Public enlightenment and social mobilization for all community involvement (FME 2004).

The Nigerian Federal government has made conscious efforts towards the realization of the UBE by the year 2015. According to the Executive Secretary of UBEC, a total of 175,767 teachers and education managers benefited from the teacher development programme in 2009 and in 2010, 153,920 benefited from the program. Also in the area of infrastructure, efforts were made in the construction of 35,965 new classrooms, renovation of 52,038 classrooms, provision of 1,004,650 sets of pupils' and teachers' furniture; construction of 12,347 toilets, sinking of 825 boreholes, and the provision of 795 electricity generators (daily champion, 2010).

Teachers have crucial role to play towards successful delivery of the education process. According to Babalola (2003), teachers are the center for quality improvement in education and upgrading the capacity of teachers would help in giving quality education to primary school children, since they are the foundation upon which a country builds its sustainability. Nigeria have made gradual move towards the 100% target by 2015. This is because, the net enrolment rate in primary education stood at 87.6% in 2006 and 89.6 in 2007 (UNDP, 2007;MDG,2010).

Although there has been tremendous increase in the net enrolment of primary school children, the question is whether this increase has translated to qualitative education in the country. The issue of quality and relevance was emphasized by Obanya, (2001) who posited that the mass schooling as envisaged by the UBE programme will not yield any benefit to the nation, unless the issues of quality, efficiency and relevance are addressed. It is therefore important that the management of UBE should pay attention not only to increases in enrolment but also to issues of relevance, quality, efficiency and equity, such that the educational system transforms the increases into critical mass of educated persons needed for national development.

This paper reviews the issues of relevance, quality, and efficiency in the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria.

The Relevance of Nigeria's UBE Curriculum

Relevance in any educational system is occupied with the issue of whether the educational system is producing manpower with skills necessary for economic growth. In this regard, the importance of relevant curriculum that responds to the needs and priorities of the learners and the nation at large cannot be over emphasized. Relevant curriculum is vital to educational success. It outlines what outline to be learned in school in order to achieve the educational objectives of a nation. The new Basic Education curriculum for primary and junior secondary schools was launched in 2007 by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The Nigerian Education Research and Development (NERDC) was accorded the responsibility of formulating and implementing the new curriculum (FGN, 2007). Although the new curriculum was introduced three years after the introduction of UBE, the Executive Secretary of NERDC gave the assurance that the curriculum would correct the abnormalities of the former one which he said was lacking in the provision of relevant basic education for the Nigerian child.

The new basic education curriculum recommends among others, training of teachers and learner-centered approach to teaching that will engage students in high level cognitive activities, which involves critical thinking and reflection. It also recommends the introduction of entrepreneurial skills. This is to ensure quality in teaching and also ensure relevance in the UBE programme. For teachers to be effective in the realization of UBE objectives, the Federal Government embarked on Capacity building programme for teachers of basic education nationwide. This is to show the importance of teachers in the implementation of UBE. In highlighting the importance of teachers, Obanya (2000) noted that no educational system can rise above the level of its teachers. In addition, Babalola, (2003) emphasized that for teachers to be effective, they need quality training and support such as teaching materials and quality teaching environment.

However, studies on assessment of teacher outcomes in relation to the capacity building programmes (outcomes such as development of skills, use of new pedagogical approaches as well as improved mastery of content and attitude to teaching) were carried out by various researchers throughout the country. Their findings revealed that learner centered approach to teaching is lacking and also methods of teaching which elicits high cognitive activities in standards, such as critical thinking are lacking. (Ukoetal, 2007, and Edet, 2011).

The reasons for non-application of the skills learnt by the teachers during the capacity building programme are attributed to poor condition of schools' infrastructure, (ESSPIN,2009), insufficient supply of infrastructural materials, and large classroom size, (Edet, 2011). Although the new Basic Education Curriculum was designed to reflect relevance, as it encouraged the acquisition of craft production skills and a culture of entrepreneurship among primary school children to address the issues of street begging and hawking, yet there seems to be little or no progress in this regard.

The Issue of Quality

The achievement of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) by the year 2015 will depend on the quality of education received by the school children. The Universal Basic Education aims at helping primary school children to acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for active and productive life.

These can only be achieved through quality education. The importance of good quality education has been reaffirmed by the Jonitien Declaration, (1990), the Dakar Framework for Action, (2000), UNICEF, (2000), and UNESCO, (2003).

Although it is difficult to define educational quality, quality in education may be seen in the context to which quality is perceived. In this paper, however, quality of education will be defined in the context of the five dimensions recognized by UNICEF (2005). These are: learners, environment, content, process and outcomes. An understanding of these dimensions will form the basis for assessing the quality of the Universal Basic Education in Nigeria.

Learners

This is characterized by healthy and ready-to-learn children. Good nutrition is critical to proper development of children. Basically, children who are well nourished are always healthy and healthy children learn better in school. To ensure quality learners, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) introduced free lunch for primary school children across the country. Every primary school is expected to give quality lunch to every primary school child.

This lofty idea was however short-lived as almost all the states could not sustain the practice. Children come to school hungry, leading to increased drop-out rates with the consequent increase in the number of street hawkers, child labour and early marriages.

Environment

Quality learning environment is crucial to quality learning. The provision of school facilities such as school buildings, instructional materials and moderate class size can enhance quality learning. Although there were provision of new classroom buildings, text books and instructional materials, empirical studies revealed that most schools are dilapidated, with inadequate textbooks and other instructional materials (Uko, et al 2007).

Content

Quality content is reflected in relevant curriculum and materials for acquisition of basic skills. The Nigerian UBE is characterized by over- crowded curriculum with about 16 subjects. This could pose challenges for teachers especially in teaching the curriculum content. In this regard, Obanya (2010) expressed concern that overcrowded curriculum is a threat to quality learning.

Quality process

Teachers are crucial in learning process. Teachers' competencies play great role in the quality of teaching especially in the use of appropriate teaching methods. Evidence has shown that teachers have not been able to practice what they learnt during the training programmes (Edet, 2011).

Outcomes

Quality outcomes encompass knowledge, skill and attitudes that are linked to positive participation in the society. Quality outcomes in the UBE programme should show gradual increase in the number of children who completed primary six and also a clear reduction in the number of children who engage in street begging, hawking, and other forms of child abuse. Since there is no evidence showing a

reduction in this regard, this puts a burning question on the relevance and quality of the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria.

The Internal Efficiency of UBE programme

The internal efficiency of an educational system can be seen on how well the educational system is doing in terms of quality outcomes. Students enrol in primary one and move up each year through the different school classes and finally they pass out into the economy. An efficient educational system will have less wastage in terms of dropout rates. According to Babalola (2003), the following indices can be used to determine the efficiency of educational system.

Admission rate / entry rate

This is the rate of new entrants of a given age into a given class level in a given year, to the total population of the age group that ought to enrol in the same class level.

Promotion rate

This is the ratio of the total number of students that are promoted in a particular class to the next higher class level in a given year to the total number of students that are enrolled in the same class in the previous year.

Repetition rate

This is the ratio of number of students that are repeating a class level in a given year to the total number of students enrolled in the same class level in the previous year.

Drop-out Rate: This is the number of students that are not promoted to the next level to the total number of students enrolled in the class level the same academic session.

Transition rate: This is the rate at which students move from one class level in a given academic session to another class level in a new academic session.

The MDGs report 2010 indicates that Nigeria has made progress in net enrolment of primary school children. For example there is increase in the net enrolment of primary school in Nigeria from 68% in the year 2000 to 88.8% in 2008. This indicates greater access to primary education with probability of reaching the target by 2015. However, the survival rate, that is, the number of pupils starting primary one who reached primary 5 in the years 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 were, 97% 97% 96% and 84% respectively. These years show good progress but subsequent years 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, showed steady decline of 74% 74% 74% 74% and 72% respectively. This is quite interesting as these years of decline coincides with the period when more teachers have been recruited and trained, more school buildings have been provided and so on. This shows that more emphasis is on the quantity of pupils enrolling in primary school than in the quality of the outcomes. Thus as more children are enrolling in primary school, more are also dropping.

In addition, the completion rate as indicated in the 2010 MDGs report also shows a steady decline. The completion rate shows the number of pupils who enrolled in primary one and were able to complete primary 6. In the year 2000, the completion rate was 76.7%, it progressed to 82% in the year 2004 and then progressively declined to 67.5% in 2007.

The above shows weakness in the internal efficiency of UBE programme in Nigeria and an indication that meeting the target in the next four years may be difficult

Summary and conclusion

Nigeria has made progress in the realization of the MDG goal 2. This is evidenced in the net enrollment of primary school pupils. Efforts were also made in improving the quality of UBE by training and retraining of teachers to improve their competences in teaching methods. There is also improvement in building of new classrooms and reconstruction of old ones and provision of teaching materials for teachers and pupils. Evidence from studies and reports across the country revealed that these efforts are not enough to bring quality and relevance to the system. Thus, unless the issues of quality and relevance of the UBE system is addressed, realization of the Millennium Development Goal 2 may not be attainable by the year 2015.

Recommendations

To address the issues of relevance, quality and efficiency in the universal basic education in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

The capacity building programme for primary school teachers should be continuous on yearly basis so as to ensure the competency of the teachers in the teaching-learning process. Teachers should be trained and at the same time, they should be encouraged to put what they learnt into practice, by providing necessary facilities that will enhance teaching and learning.

In addition, measures should be taken to enhance the completion rate of primary school children, by reducing dropout rates. It is therefore suggested that the issue of free lunch should be revisited. Primary school pupils should be given free lunch to enable them concentrate in learning activities. Apart from this, the school environment should be friendly and every child should have access to all learning materials.

Community participation and involvement should be stimulated. In particular, parents should participate fully in school activities and this can improve attendance and retention of the pupils.

The use of ICT should be encouraged at the primary level to enable every child to be competent after completion of schooling.

Efforts should be made by the management of UBE to ensure transparency and accountability, especially in ensuring that the funds allocated to UBE programmes are judiciously used.

Finally, it is recommended that increased effort should be made in monitoring and supervision of UBE especially in the area of teaching and learning achievements.

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