

Changing Phases of Nigerian Education Policies and Challenges of Functionalism

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Abstract

The problem which this paper discussed is that of possible reasons why the different Nigerian educational systems introduced has not been functional at the different levels. The result of each system that has been introduced is failure in realizing the objectives and expectations of its introduction. In most of the instances blame for failure has been attributed to bad implementation. But beyond the factor of implementation this paper highlighted at least five constraining factors which if not corrected may not allow any educational system introduced to become functional. The paper also pointed to four issues that constitute the bane of policy enactments by operatives of the Nigerian Governments at different levels of governance. Recommendations were suggested at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Changing Phases, Policy, Challenge, Functionalism

1. Introduction

The Nigerian education system has been subject of discussion by different authors. Some of the discussions are positive pointing to government attempts at making the system relevant and beneficial to the generality of those who pass through it. However, many of the discussions have been negative pointing to its deficiencies and inability to produce graduates who meet the expectations of the society. For instance, Obijiofor (2011) and Idris (2011) are among the recent commentators on the 9-3-4 education policy introduced by the Federal Government of Nigeria on the 8th November, 2007. Their comments bothered majorly on unjustifiable reasons for opting for another education policy when the 6-3-3-4 was not religiously followed for success. This paper is an attempt to answer the question, what are the possible reasons that make Nigerian education system not to be working properly in spite of the changes in policies which government introduce as measures to correct observed deficiencies in a preceding policy practice?

The operational verb in this topic is functionalism and it refers to a system or philosophy that sees practical and utilitarian concerns as having priority over aesthetics. Because of where priority is placed, the beauty of statements of intentions, or the courting of public acceptance and praise is secondary to the workability of the pronouncements. It is a belief guided by the conviction that the intended function of a thing should determine its choice, design, construction and choice of materials (Encarta Dictionaries). For anything to be addressed as functional, it means that the thing is working according to the purpose for which it was put into place (BBC English Dictionary, 1992). This paper therefore, seeks to find out if the development of the different Nigerian educational policies has been guided by a philosophy that places utilitarian concerns above aesthetics and whether their choice, design, construction and choice of materials were guided by intended functions. It also seeks to highlight those factors that set limitations on achievement profile. The paper's focus is only on the phases of Nigerian systems of education.

2. Phases of Nigerian Education System

The foundation of Nigeria's policy on education is based on some of the most pivotal national objectives achievable through education. Some of these objectives are; - (1) working at achieving a free and democratic society, (2) working at ensuring a just and egalitarian society, (3) working at making Nigeria a land that is bright and full of opportunity for all its citizens, (4) helping individuals to become responsible citizens who can contribute positively to national development (National Policy on Education, 1988), and (5) raising a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others; a people who have respect for dignity of labour and appreciate the values of good citizenship (National Policy on Education, 2004). The system as it is currently operating seems incapable of achieving the objectives set out for its establishment.

Phases of the Nigerian education system carry different nomenclatures which usually at a glance show the period an individual going through the system would spend before completing the different stages of its progressive arrangement. The ones this paper considers are the 9-3-4; 6-3-3-4 and the 6-5-4 systems. Beginning

with the most recently introduced 9-3-4 system currently expected to be in operation; it was launched 8th November, 2007 during the tenure of Obi Ezekwesili as Nigeria's Federal Minister of Education. By implication the education system of Nigeria is structured along three levels of lower, middle and upper segments of 9 years basic education, 3 years of senior secondary education and 4 years of tertiary education. The lower level of the basic education is primary 1-3, the middle level is primary 4-6 while, and the upper level is Junior Secondary School 1-3. In each of the three levels there are about twelve compulsory subjects with one elective and painfully though, indigenous language was de-emphasized. This curriculum is expected to be effective October 2010, but till now many individuals who should operate the system do not know what exactly it is all about.

The system came along with the privatization programme of the unity schools earlier known as Federal Government Colleges which was thought of as being tool or organ for national integration (Vanguard online June 28, 2012). The major reason for the change of system is to produce graduates who will possess skills in information communication technology (ICT) and become less dependent on employers of labour after completing school. They would acquire sufficient skills to become self-employed and employers of labour.

Before the introduction of the 9-3-4 system, the 6-3-3-4 introduced in 1982 was in operation. It is a policy in which learners are to spend 6 years in the primary school, 3 years for the junior secondary school education, and if on completion a student is discovered to have no flair for academics; such a student proceeds to spend another 3 years for vocational and technical education to acquire skills that will make the student get employed or become self employed. The student that shows academic flair proceeds to the senior secondary school to spend 3 years and consequently 4 years for tertiary education. The purpose for introducing this system was to infuse functionality into the Nigerian education system such that graduates of the system would be capable of using their hands, heads and heart. This system was declared as a failure by even the president of the country Ebele Jonathan (October, 2010) when he was speaking with national stake holders on the education sector. The ideal objectives which the system advocated were not realized mostly because no parent of students would want their children to stop formal school at the senior secondary school level, however, incompetent.

The 6-3-3-4 was preceded by the 6-5-4 system in which a learner uses 6 years to pass through the primary education, 5 years to complete the secondary education and 4 years to go through the tertiary education programme. This was the beginning of free and compulsory education emphasis at different levels by governments that ruled the country. The free and compulsory education somehow dented the competitive spirits of students with regard to entrance exams into primary and secondary schools.

3. Education Systems and Developmental Strides

It is doubtful if any nation can rise above the quality of its educated citizenry therefore, meaningful development is contingent upon the kind of education that those seeking development have provided for their members. Learning drives out illiteracy and in a situation in which the population is largely illiterate and non-numerate; the gains of scientific and technological development cannot be greatly felt. This is because education should lead people to become intelligent and be able to discover the truth rather than being mechanical robots (Smith, 1972; Reed, 1993). Illiteracy lead people in the opposite direction of what advantages literacy and numeracy lead. Countries referred to as developed are so categorized principally because of the level of literacy which their citizens have acquired and translated into economic and social benefits. Nigeria for instance, recognized literacy as a basic tool for personal and national development and as a result placed inculcation of permanent literacy, ability to communicate effectively and development of reading culture as some of the objectives of school education (National Policy on Education, 2004). What may be said to account for the failure of Nigerian education systems to become functional? Next parts of this paper make attempts to answer this question.

4. Constraints to Functionalism of Nigerian Education

Some of the noticeable constraints which the Nigerian education system has to confront and do all that is possible to remove on its path to becoming functional are highlighted below.

1). *General consumer mentality of Nigerians*: Because the nation has always gotten money to do many things and government has always shown the nationals that it is capable of taking care of all the needs of the people without demanding people's personal contributions in the form of taxes and other necessary levies; it is not compelling on nationals to be productive oriented. They rather become consumers which as consequence see the Nigerian markets saturated with imported goods with as little items as chewing gums, biscuits, cosmetics, rice and so forth. Consuming imported materials is sometimes seen as a symbol of status and affluence respected by the society. By implication, there seems to be a lack of conviction that our educational system should enhance the production of functional scientific and technological graduates who will work at making our industries

produce the things we need for our livelihood. This mentality has to change if our educational system is to become functional.

2). *A mind-set that economic wealth is easy to come by*: there seems to be a belief by the generality of Nigerians that, the nation is graciously endowed by God with so much wealth that each person is just demanded to struggle to cut his or her share of the national cake. Everybody depends on oil revenue therefore, there is no need to work and build up wealth for coming generation of Nigerians. People discovered it is easier to become wealthy in a very short time by being a contractor or joining the political group. Nigeria is a country that sees it as preferable to abandon the source of the nations' wealth in the hands of foreigners and become earners of what the foreigners decide to give the country. Its nationals hardly run any government enterprise successfully and consider any government step at establishing new schools or improving on infrastructure and equipment as opportunity to amass wealth. When efforts at funding educationally related issues are seen as avenues for sourcing easy economic wealth, education cannot be functional.

3). *Seemingly lack of faith in the corporate existence of the nation*: almost every leader sees leadership position as an opportunity to milk the national treasury to his personal advantage, that of his immediate family, that of his people, religion or party colleagues before the nation disintegrates. There is always a reflection of this thinking when national issues are being discussed. Discussions usually toe the line of; what goes to the north, east, west, south-south or the middle belt and not what will make the nation become greater and better united. The major reason why the nation does not benefit from the competences, qualities, gifts and abilities of those who are naturally endowed but are kept out of the mainstream of affairs is because, these individuals do not belong to the preferred group of the power brokers who call the shots. It is becoming more difficult to determine when the nation would have leaders who by their actions show that they have faith in the corporate existence of the nation. This factor has done more harm than good in making education in Nigeria lack the elements of functionalism.

4). *Introduction of policies with purposes that are suspect*: Some people have complained that some policies are intended to marginalize them; for instance, Idris (2011) complained that the newly introduced educational curriculum for basic education was directed at marginalizing students who want to combine the study of Arabic with business related courses. It is unfortunate but observably true that some of the policies introduced to guide educational practices in Nigeria are done so as to serve as channels through which funds allocated to the sector may be expended to benefit officials through giving out of over-priced contracts or wasteful services in the name of mobilizing for the new policies. When purpose is suspect it becomes difficult for education to be functional. Purposes for introduction of new policies has to be objective, clear and understood by stake holders in the sector.

5). *The Religious and Spiritual Connection*: religion and spirituality have been used on many occasions as cover to mobilize support for issues that divide rather than unite the different units that constitute the nation. Nigerians have been credited to be religious people but generally, whose religiosity does not reflect on their characters in public life and their interpersonal relationships (Kukah, 1993). For instance, many still hold dearly to obsession for material things, greed for power and position for the sake of it and popularity even when there are evident incompetencies on the part of the individual seeking such things. A people that are divided would find it difficult to achieve an objective of making education functional.

5. The Bane of Policy Enactments

Another side to the problem of non-functionalism of the Nigerian education system is what this paper referred to as bane of policy enactments. This means that there are some irritating or mysterious factors which policy planners need to take care of for the purpose of enhancing functionalism of the system. These include; -

a). *Inadequate preparation and mobilization on the part of policy developers*. With regular changes occurring in government operations and structures; ministers taking care of the educational ministry cannot be sure of how long they will spend in office. It then becomes difficult to assess how a minister of education who for instance stays in office for two years understands the problem of education in the whole nation; propose changes in policy and develop a policy to change an existing one. It is even most probable that the same minister would not be in office to implement the policy he or she has pronounced. It becomes irritating therefore, when a new minister assumes office to be confronted with implementation of policies he or she is not part of its development. Policy changes must be rooted in serious observed deficiencies else, reviews can be done to an existing one to bring it up to the level anticipated.

b). *Faulty planning that boils down to lack of understanding of the policy provisions*: on many occasions those who are expected to implement policies lack the understanding of the policy provisions. Most of the time, implementers do not understand who is to do what, and how what is expected to be done should be done? Even

though, a policy can be meant to achieve a lot of good for the people, but when it is not understood by those to implement it, there is little chance for it to become successful. Adeshina ((1988: 99) observed long ago that “you cannot have good teachers until you have good schools or good schools until you have good teachers.”

c). *Paying of lip service rather than being actively working at realization of objectives*: it usually occur that officials who should be responsible for seeing to the success of a policy only pay lip service to what they publicly pronounced. For instance, there can be cases of non-release of funds meant for execution of programmes or non-approval of recruitment of personnel needed for achieving objectives of the programmes. And these problems are caused by the same officials who publicly pronounced the policies.

d). *Passive or completely absent supervisory apparatus*: supervision has not been given the attention it deserves in the scheme of things in Nigeria’s educational endeavours. The different types of supervision which if conducted appropriately should keep schools and their managers on their toes are either neglected or are done haphazardly. Within the school supervision there can be the West African Examination Council (WAEC) recognition inspection, routine or casual check-up visits, subject inspection, plant inspection, full inspection and inter-school visitations (Ojoawo, 1995; Afolabi, 2011).

6. The Need for Revolution in the System

It is the opinion of this writer that the Nigerian society strongly requires revolution in its education system and, that early too. A situation is on our hands in which our senior secondary school students who sat for West African Examination Council exams made less than ten percent (10%) credit pass in their final examinations; this is ridiculous. University products of the educational system have been described as mostly unemployable (Babalola, 2009). We operate an educational system which has access difficulty for the education of its citizens. It was reported that Nigeria has about twenty (20) million primary school pupils, five (5) million secondary school students and one million five hundred (1.5M) students in her tertiary institutions (Voice of America Hausa Service

6.00-6.30am News; 28/5/2012). Annually, about one (1) million students pass out of secondary schools and about seven hundred thousand of them meet entry requirements or conditions for admission into the Universities, but only about one hundred and fifty thousand of the students get admitted into the Universities (Ibid). This shows an acute shortage of access to educational opportunities for the Nigerian students, particularly in the higher education sector which is the most important sector with respect to contributions for national development in science, technology and skilled manpower production for the society.

Isiramen (2010) added that, the Nigerian children who somehow find themselves in schools are confronted with the problem of getting sub-standard education as most of the teaching personnel are unqualified. The short fall in placement of secondary students into the tertiary institutions is not visibly addressed in practical terms. So is the short fall in placement of primary school pupils into secondary school education. There is therefore, a colossal waste of human resource that should otherwise have contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of the country if they had been provided education as desired by the terms of the national policy on education. A 2008 UNICEF investigation showed there are over ten (10) million Nigerian children of school age who are not in any form of formal school (Ibid).

Though the Nigerian Governments at the Federal, State and local Government levels make claims to have spent huge sums of money to bring about an efficient and effective education system, the story of the system is that of a moribund institution characterized by poor academic performance, obsolete equipments where they are available, inadequate classrooms, poor library and laboratory facilities, inadequate qualified teaching staff, dilapidated structures and curriculum that is largely prescriptive, and rigid in content and methodology (Oyerinola, 2011). We have a system that has defied Government interjection through introduction of diverse forms of education systems especially at the foundational level at States and Federal levels. Free education was introduced by Awolowo in 1955 in Western Region, Azikiwe introduced a similar programme into Eastern Nigeria in 1957; in 1960 Ahmadu Bello introduced free education in Northern Nigeria; by 1976 Obasanjo as a military Head of State introduced Universal Primary education; in 1979 the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) introduced Free education at all levels in the UPN states and by 1999, under Obasanjo’s civilian administration the Universal Basic education was introduced (Olayanju, 2011). All these innovations have not been able to lift educational standard in Nigeria to enviable levels.

7. Making the System Functional

To make the system functional demands that, all hands must be on deck. Nigeria does not need external people to help her out of this problem but she can learn from others to find out how they overcame similar challenges in the past. The problem of non-functionalism of Nigerian education system has been allowed to grow to an extent that it can now be categorized as epidemic needing serious and emergency national attention. Even though there

are other issues competing for the attention of government budgetary allocations, it is suggested that education should be set as priority. This is because if it succeeds some of the problems arising from illiterate perspectives would be eradicated. It is not needful that every minister of education introduces new education policies, after all, the policies has not introduced fundamental changes in books used for instructions, structures put in place with regard to educational administration or physical materials, teachers utilized for carrying out the intended purposes of the policies. As a matter, of fact most of the school children and their teachers interviewed do not know the difference between basic education nomenclatures and the primary school system. A policy should be maintained and regularly reviewed so as to meet up with the challenges of non-functionalism. Identified areas of deficiencies are to be worked on and amended and tried again to assess the amendments and see if it has been able to solve problems discovered.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the problem of the changing phases of the Nigerian education system and the reasons for its being non-functional despite attempts at policy changes to ensure same. The paper highlighted some of the problems associated with how the some of the policies are arrived at and some of the important constraints that have to be removed if the nation desires that its education system becomes functional. The paper is of the opinion that maintaining a policy that is subject to regular reviews is better for the country towards its drive to make education functional.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- 1). Government should discourage the habit of regular policy change based on flimsy reasons or promise of superficial results when reality on ground does not dictates or indicate any sign of the same.
- 2). Government should determine to spend a good percentage of its annual budget in funding education. The fund is to be strictly supervised such that equipments and other materials purchased are delivered to their destinations and are used for educational purposes.
- 3). More schools should be built by governments, individuals, organizations and private concerns to make adequate provision for placement of students in institution.
- 4). Competitive examinations for placement into school should be restored back again so as to make student imbibe the mentality of courage and doing their best in all they do.

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