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THE 1955 WESTERN REGION UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION (UPE) PROGRAMME IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: LESSON FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract

Six decades after the introduction of the 1955 Universal Primary Education programme, the Nigerian primary educational system remains comatose. This study, a historical discussion, therefore, investigated the programme taking cognizance of the political, economic and socio-cultural considerations that contributed to its acclaimed success. The study noted the detailed planning and preparation made for the project, the ideological commitment of the Action Group government and its huge financial investment on the programme which was meant to accelerate the development of the people; as well efforts to evaluate the programme during implementation with a view to enhancing its quality. Neither the 1976 UPE nor the current UBE programmes have impacted the Nigerian society like the 1955 programme. Under the 1976 programme expansion of primary education was achieved without due regard to adequate teacher strength and efficiency, over enrolment resulting in overcrowded classrooms, inadequate and insufficient instructional and learning materials and poor physical facilities. Sixteen years after being launched as a reform measure to address the gaps and distortions in basic education level of the 1980s and 1990s the UBE has not eradicated illiteracy, ignorance and poverty. Neither has it shown sufficient evidence of being capable of stimulating and accelerating national development and integration. Taking cognisance of the high points of the 1955 programme the paper made recommendations which could greatly improve the current primary education sector.

Introduction

The decade beginning from 1951 marked the most significant expansion in the history of Nigerian education. In terms of administrative responsibility, state governments began to share responsibilities for primary schools with local educational authorities. In 1952, the African Education Conference was held in Cambridge. The four Ministers of Education, representing the federal and regional governments of Nigeria attended as observers. The Conference dealt with so many issues facing policy makers, and all who had responsibilities for managing education. The conference and other political expediencies of the times emboldened the then Western Regional government to accelerate her educational reform programme.

Universal Primary Education (UPE) 1955

Two months before the September 1952 Conference, the Action Group Government of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, through the Minister of Education, had presented a proposal for "a free universal and compulsory education" for the Western Region by January 1955 (Taiwo, 1982). Preparations were made to actualise the programme between 1952 and 1954. Teachers were trained, new school buildings were also put up. On January 17, 1955, the programme took-off without the word "compulsory" (Fafunwa, 1991). The idea of compulsion was dropped to reduce the financial cost.

Obanya (2004) outlined some of the basic elements of the programme. It was to be a free compulsory education scheme. It brought school nearer to the rural and urban communities. Primary education was restructured reducing its duration from eight to six years. It set a target which no government thereafter could afford to ignore, and one to which this country is still aspiring. The fact that it was conceived as a free and compulsory programme implied that it would be universal. It was an acknowledgement of the fact that all Nigerian children are entitled to formal education. Modification in the programme could not eradicate the idea of it being a universal programme for all children in intent, hence, the more convenient description universal primary education (Osokoya, 1987).

The curriculum reflected the environment in which the children went to school. There was provision for learning in the mother tongue in the early years and for transmission of the cultural values. The programme was not free in the sense of abandoning all financial responsibility to government, but it had a tremendous impact on Nigeria's education system (Obanya, 2004).

It started a momentum whose tide could not be halted. But it moved beyond the issues of application of education to numeracy and literacy. It

helped to create an informed and enlightened community which was the most important element in a democratic system which Nigeria was trying to operate. It also indeed established the principle of opportunity for all regardless of state of origin, sex or social circumstances. It also indeed established the principle of opportunity for all regardless of state of origin, sex or social circumstances. It established the fact that all citizens are stakeholders in the building of society (Fafunwa, 1991). The programme triggered off man power development and thereby made the country one of the few countries in Africa where there were substantial output of men and women who were qualified to be at the helm of the economy, politics, and social development both within and outside the country.

In 2005, Reuben Abati, in a lecture on "Fifty years of Free Education in Western Nigeria; Past, Present and Future" pointed out that many beneficiaries of the 1955 UPE programme had made tremendous contributions to man-power development and has given continuous stimulus to the nation's capacity building efforts. He added that the programme helped to create a momentum which set the Western Region apart from the rest of the country. Through its development of literacy, the programme created an informed public. In response to the quest for information by that public, there developed local newspapers, some in vernacular like Alaroye and Atoka series. It also accounted for the emergence of a significant number of articulate citizens who responded very quickly to perceived wrongs and rights more than anywhere else in the country. Apart from the immediate response, the history of primary education thereafter until the present consisted largely of attempts to fashion it after the initial Action Group's 1955 programme with modification reflecting political, economic and social situations at different stages of the national growth.

When the programme was launched on 17 January, 1955, the number of children that turned up was far more than what was provided for. Fafunwa (1991) puts the figure at above 811,000, representing about 61% of the age - bracket of 5-14 years. Only 35% of children in that age bracket had been in school in 1954 (Taiwo, 1982). In spite of the fact that the government had prepared for the programme for at least three years, there were however some initial lapses that posed serious challenges to the programme the huge turnout was just unexpected. It was found that statistical record on which school enrolment projection was based was faulty. The teacher population rose from 17.000 to 27.000 and the budgetary allocation to education moved from 2.2 million pounds in 1954 to 5.4 million pounds in 1955. Nearly 90% of that budget allocation was spent on primary

education. By the year of independence in 1960, over 1.1 million pupils were in school in the Western Region. The figure represented over 90% of children in the school going age bracket (Obanya, 2004).

Why the Programme Succeeded

In the early 1950s, when regional governments in Nigeria took over the responsibility for primary education, finance continued to be a major headache for the school system. The 1959 Educational Act for instance established Local Education Authorities and Local Committees. The Act emphasized joint responsibility of the central, regional and local governments, the local communities and parents in financing primary education. There was no reference to the specific level of involvement of any of the parties so listed. It was quite easy therefore to shift responsibility among the parties.

It may be noted, however, that with the introduction of the UPE in 1955 and 1957 in the West and East respectively there was substantial increase in educational budgetary allocation. For instance each of the two regions committed over 30 percent of their annual budgets to education (Ajayi and Ajayi, 1988). This means, in effect, that responsibility for financing primary education shifted greatly to the regional government. It has been observed that substantial part of budgetary allocation to education in the Western Region between 1955 and 1966 was spent on primary education (Taiwo, 1982). The table below clearly indicated this.

Table 1: Government Expenditure on Primary Education in the West (1955-1966)

Year	Total Education Grant (in 000s)	Grant in Primary Education (in 000s)	% of Total Grant
1955/56	5,342	2,767	52.00
1956/57	5,059	3,011	60.00
1957/58	5,885	3,337	57.00
1958/59	5,569	3,867	69.00
1959/60	5,889	4,883	83.00
1960/61	7,400	6,205	84.00
1961/62	7,566	6,144	81.00
1962/63	7,850	5,944	76.00
1963/64	6,170	4,551	74.00
1964/65	6,178	4,791	78.00
1965/66	6,250	5,020	80.00

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Source: Ajayi, 1984 (cited in Ajayi, 2005).

It is evident from Table 1 that a sizeable portion of money was expended on primary education in the Western Region between 1955 and 1966. It shows that in 1955/56 school year 52% of the total educational grant was spent on primary education. From that year the percentage increased steadily until it reached the peak of 84% in 1960/61. Even after that year the average annual grant to primary education was in the average of 79.4% of the educational.

The introduction of the UPE was largely responsible for this. It shows the extent to which government was committed to the programme. Ajayi observed that by 1960, the Western Regional government was spending about 41% of its budget on the UPE programme.

Though the Eastern Nigerian Government had also introduced a UPE programme in 1957, the scheme was more successful in the Western Region than in the East where the programme was virtually shelved only after one year because of better preparation and more determination (Ocho, 1988). The failure of the programme in the East was attributed to insufficient funds (p. 68). The West, following the regionalization of the central marketing Board, had a substantial allocation deriving from the foreign exchange reserves which had accumulated from the sales of cocoa during the war years. While the Eastern Region received only 15.1 million pounds sterling and the Northern Region only 24.8 million pounds sterling, the Western Region received as much as 34.4 million pounds sterling. The Western Region, therefore, had the financial capacity to embark on the project.

In addition to financial advantage, the government of the Western Region was more purposeful in its pursuit of the UPE programme. Dudley (1978) argued that the government of Obafemi Awolowo, Awoloso saw the scheme of free-education as a start in the equalization of opportunity; especially that kind of opportunity that will place the Yoruba's at a vantage position in national affairs. Awolowo's commitment to the process of equalization of opportunity is better explained in terms of his ideological orientations. Dudley would certainly not subscribe to the assertion. But government's action on UPE was certainly a product of Awolowo's socialist orientation, which is predicated on the axiom the "free development of each as the condition for the free development of all" (Awolowo, 1960). Suffice it to say then that the UPE was introduced in 1955 as a means of accelerating the development of the people in Western Region to face the challenges and respond positively to the demands of the nationalist agitations for self-rule.

Ajayi (1984) as cited in his 2005 work noted that the expansion of primary schools as a result of the 1955 UPE programme "provided a wider base from which secondary schools, trade schools and teacher training colleges draw their new entrants. The process also quickened the pace of the development of middle level man power. Furthermore, it encouraged parents to send their female children to school. The development enlarged the pool from which talent and potential man power was tapped.

A number of efforts were made to ensure that money spent on primary education, in particular, and education generally was justified. The Banjo (1960) and Taiwo (1968) commissions were consequently set up in the 1960s to proffer solution to the many problems engendered by the financial commitments to education. Like the Banjo Commission before it, the Taiwo Commission Report had far reaching impact on the nation as a whole, even though it was established to provide solution to what were considered as the problems of primary education in the Western State. For instance, the committee re-focused the essence of primary education within the educational system. The commission considered primary education as an autonomous stage of education which was to equip a child for adult life. It considered the child as a little citizen with a sound standard of individual conduct. Primary education was therefore meant to lay a solid foundation for the future (Taiwo, 1982) especially for the few who went on to secondary school. Osokoya (1987) showed that the Commission stressed primary education as being both a social service and an investment in man-power.

Further, the Commission's report decentralized the educational process, ensuring that all tiers of government as well as parents became actively involved in the management of the primary school system.

The introduction of the 1976 UPE marked a new era in the history of primary education in Nigeria. Primary education became the full responsibility of the Federal Government. It also meant that every Nigerian child could regard basic education as his natural heritage, a right and no longer a privilege. Remarkable progress was made in that there had been wide expansion of the primary school system. More children were enrolled in schools, and great resources were invested in the system. The programme failed. There was rising incidence of poor performance in public schools, most pupils who complete primary schools unable to read and write simple sentences in both English and their native language, many primary pupils dropped out of schools; parents were not willing to patronize the public schools, while the number of functionally illiterates continued to swell (Ola-Alani, 2012). Expansion of primary education was achieved without due

regard to adequate teacher strength, over enrolment resulting in overcrowded classrooms, inadequate and insufficient

The UBE introduced in 1999 was a reform programme aimed at correcting the inadequacies that existed in the primary school system of the 1980s and 1990s. The programme was meant to increase access, improve quality and people's greater commitment and support, training and retraining of teachers and making the curriculum more responsive to the needs of the society. The UBE essentially seeks to produce primary school child who is able to hold his own against all odds, should he be unable to pursue further schooling at the completion of his basic education. The responsibility for implementing the UBE is a collaborative one, a partnership involving federal government, states and governments, communities, civil societies and internal agencies, and societies and international agencies. Thus far great support has been received from international agencies.

Accordingly to Tahir (2003) since the introduction of the UBE remarkable changes had occurred in the primary school system. These changes were most visible in the training and re-training of teachers, increase in enrolment construction and renovation of classrooms by states, local government and the provision of instructional materials to primary schools. The nature and magnitude of the changes varied from state to state depending on how each local government or state perceived and pursued the reform measure. In 2004 for instance, The Federal Government set up a fund to help the states to provide quality basic education. The fund was to be financed with two percent of the Consolidated Revenue Fund. They are also to meet few other due process requirements UBE serves as the co-coordinator for its implementation.

According to the Executive Secretary between 2005 and 2009, the fund was used to construct 41,009, new classroom, renovate 594,44 others, provide 1,139,196 pieces of furniture for pupils and teachers, construct 14,769 toilets, sink 996 boreholes and provide 1.7 million library material and 16.3 million English, mathematics and science textbooks in junior secondary schools among others.

Surprisingly, however the Executive Secretary observed that between 2010 and 2013, 27 out of the 36 Nigerian States had not contributed their counterpart fund, and thus denied themselves from the benefits accruable from the scheme. It is believed that such states had distanced themselves from the scheme because of required accountability and transparency. UBEC tracks the utilization of funds released to each state as well as the counterpart fund, a situation which most of the states do not seem to appreciate. UBEC have had course to accuse some states of diverting UBEC

allocation. In refusing to access the fund meant for promoting the objective of UBE, the society is the ultimate loser. Nigerian's citizens therefore cannot key into the global grid of economic development and purges without a sound education, which begins at the basic level.

Furthermore, Ola-Alani (2012) affirming a 2003 Educational Sector Status Report noted that specific improvement were still needed in the training that teachers received. Deficiencies were identified in teacher's knowledge and skills in the area of language. They were found to need more skills in teaching initial literacy, number and basic science concepts in the children's mother tongue, more ability to manage children's learning needs during the transition to English as a medium of instruction and more awareness of the importance of language across the curriculum. It is also suggested that they need additional training in the use of instructional time in promoting active training, in promoting active learning, in assessment techniques and in teacher team work (ESSR, 2003).

Over all, teacher quality at primary level seems to be low. The problem of teacher education cannot be detached from the continuing low morale and status of teachers, poor incentives to improve performance, poorly and equipped working conditions, inadequate social recognition and lack of control over working conditions in addition to late payment of salaries still prevalent. The task of improving teachers, welfare and commitment to their work ought to be sufficiently addressed. The significance of their service ought to be recognized in terms of Lassa's (2000) observation that "the quality of teachers trained and posted to a school may well determine what the next generation of Nigerians would be" (ESSR, 2003).

Sixteen years after being launched as a reform programme to address the gaps and distortions in the basic education level the UBE has not eradicated illiteracy and ignorance. Not much impact has been made in resolving the crisis in the educational system. In spite of the huge investment of government the seemingly rhetorical question of Pritchett (2001), where has all the education gone, remains pertinent. Neither has it shown sufficient evidence of being capable of stimulating, and accelerating national development and integration.

It is against foregoing background that the 1955 programme was reviewed with the realization that constraints of financial, political and social elements result in modifications of policies. Existing realities modify otherwise ideal objectives or goals which may have originally informed the formulation of a particular policy, in which case the result of a programme policy may be less than what was originally intended. The educational system which over the year had been fashioned in a linear mode of

expansion, relying largely on injection or infusion of more financial and other resources to bring about improvement ought to cease. Instead a more incisive method which seeks to better utilize the rather meager and scarce resources had to be fashioned out.

Primary education principally create awareness and make people better informed about their environment, reduce superstition and make them more tolerant in dealing with other people. Not only does it make people conscious of their way of life but its development and growth depends on their abilities, attitudes and skill. The essence of primary education therefore is to enhance the quality of service which people render to their community as well as improve upon their personal well-being (Mwagwu, 1978). It was clear that the 1955 UPE, even after the immediate post independent years, produced average primary six school leavers that could be engaged as pupil teacher in the primary schools, with a high degree of effectiveness. Their primary education was sufficient not only to improve on their own personal well-being but also contributed greatly to the advancement and progress of their communities. They effectively served as letter writers and opinion moulders in their communities.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the 1955 UPF programme was successful because it was specifically set up for a clearly defined purpose of accelerating the development of the people of the Region. Government was ideologically committed to it. Great deal of planning and preparation also went into the project. Large amount of money was also invested in the programme. Two commissions were also set up within a period of about ten years to appraise the programme with a view to improving the programme. They affirmed that Government alone could not fund education. All stakeholders must be actively involved.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore made as a means of improving the quality of the current UBE programme:

1. A conscious commitment to a human development ideological orientation devoid of the present lip service being paid to educational policies as instruments of social transformation by various governments of the day.
2. Free education should not only be quantitative, it must of necessity also be qualitative. Serious effort must, therefore, be made to address

- the inadequacies of infrastructural and instructional materials. Functional libraries must be established in schools, possibly with the support of PTAs. The provision of materials and learning resources generally must also not be left in the hands of any one agent. It is necessary for parents/guardians to supplement governments' efforts by providing their wards with necessary educational materials, especially writing materials and basic textbooks.
3. Primary school curriculum must be rationalized to meet community/local aspirations, while it must also meet the demands of the contemporary society at large.
 4. The professionalization of teaching service must be justified in terms of the quality of the professionals. Consequently, the welfare of primary school teachers must go beyond mere salary increases. Terms of service must be attractive enough to retain the best brains, especially in the rural areas.
 5. Community involvement in managing community primary schools should be revived and greatly encouraged not only in terms of financial inputs, but also in their participation in assisting the schools to maintain discipline. Funds for implementing free education is crucial. All stakeholders must be mobilized in order to raise specified proportions of money required.
 6. Government must make effort to attain the UNESCO recommended 26.0% budget allocation to education. A review of the revenue allocation formula in a more progressive manner as to favour the states and local governments with emphasis on meeting the UNESCO budgetary allocation to education must be seriously examined. Alternatively, the percentage should be increased substantially.
 7. The emphasis in financing of primary education must be placed on better utilization of the available funds, the allocation of additional funds to the sector and the diversification of sources of funding. Decentralization of finance and management requires adequate management skills for state and local government administration as well as head teachers.
 8. Enhancing teacher quality and productivity by increasing opportunities for in-service training at local levels should receive government attention. In-service training ought to be ongoing, regular and woven into the fabric of the teachers' daily activities, while also a dressing the expressed concern and needs of teachers.

9. Mechanism should also be devised to improve the accuracy and promptness of publication of necessary planning statistics such as census data and annual statistics of education.

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