

ISSN 0189 - 7012



Journal *of*

EDUCATIONAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

JEMT

**JOURNAL OF NIGERIA
FOR EDUCATIONAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY**

**JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL
MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY
(JEMT)**

VOLUME 13 NUMBER 1, 2007

ISSN 0189-7012

JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY (JEMT)

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Volume 13, Number 1, 2007

ISSN 0189 – 7012.

JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY (JEMT)

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AN EXAMINATION OF RECENT REFORMS
IN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

By
Ayotunde Frnaxis. OYELADE (Ph.D)
Department Of Arts And Social Sciences Education
Faculty Of Education University Of Ilorin

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the recent reforms in education in Nigeria, with the view to critically determine whether they are in the right direction or not. The period covered includes the past eight years of democratic government in Nigeria. Philosophical analysis was used in the examination. It was found that the reforms include public-private-partnership in the running of education; integrated early child care development programme in the elementary schools in the Maria Montessori fashion; proposed consolidation of polytechnics and colleges of education with proximate universities; Community Accountability and Transparency Initiative (CATI); and many others. It was also found that many of the reforms are desirable while some may not be so desirable. It was therefore recommended that the desirable ones be continued.

Introduction

Nigeria is forty seven years old this year (2007) and it has gone through various stages of education – the colonial and the post-colonial. In the colonial era, the British influence was felt in the curriculum as the subjects taught in the schools were patterned after British school subjects. In the post colonial era the curriculum was still largely British for some years, that is until the three regions North, East and West started to yearn for assertion of the development of indigenous Nigerian culture through education. Thus University of Nigeria Nsukka, University of Ibadan (which was earlier University College, Ibadan), Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and University of Lagos, Lagos, the first generation universities in the country started to incorporate courses that asserted the Nigerian cultural aspirations in their curricula.

The products of these institutions were to bring into realization the yearnings of Nigerians as they worked in various spheres of the economy including the educational sector¹. However, at the same time that Nigerians were yearning for assertion of Nigerian cultural and social development through education, the British colonial

government was also eager to help Nigeria to attain self-realisation through education. That was why the British colonial government at the eve of independence set up Eric Ashby Commission (April 1959 – September 1960) to advise her on the needs of Nigeria in terms of post school-certificate and higher education for the next twenty years (i.e. from 1960 – 1980)² whereby the foundation for the realization of such needs could be laid towards the realization of Nigeria's socio-cultural development through education³.

The point therefore is that shortly before independence and immediately after independence Nigerians and even our colonial masters had been anxious for the assertion of the Nigerian social cultural aspirations in our education such as to promote Nigerian socio-cultural development through education. This was further pronounced after the civil war experience that lasted thirty months.

While the civil war was still on, there was the National Curriculum Conference of September 1969 in Lagos wherein Nigerians decided on the curriculum that would realistically help the young nation to survive and progress as a strong, dynamic, united and peaceful nation⁴. The conference proceedings served as blueprint for the first National Policy on Education 1977 that continues to be revised up till today. The latest revised edition is the 2004 edition; although there is the impression that another revised edition will soon be released for public consumption. The reason, or rather one of the obvious reasons is because of the recent revision of the Nigerian educational system. The system is no longer the proposed 6-3-3-4 system of education of the 1969 Curriculum Conference that became policy matter in 1977 and became matter for implementation shortly afterwards.

Now the system involves nine years of Basic education and three years of Senior Secondary education and four years of Tertiary education. The *details* of the revisions at the various levels of education have to be spelt out, there is need for *details* in the education that would emphasize self-employment and blue-collar jobs more than government employment and white-collar jobs. There is need for *details* on the education that would emphasize more productivity on the part of the graduates; emphasize information and communication technology; and other areas of recent emphases of the democratic government of the past eight years or so. This is why it is assumed that the details of the shift in the past emphases on education by the past governments would be made public in another (revised) National Policy on Education.

The steps towards realizing this are already being taken; in fact they have been set in motion for quite some time now. The National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) of former President Obasanjo regime is part of the insight documents towards demonstrating what the democratic era of Obasanjo and the people who follow his thinking would want to see incorporated in a revised National Policy on Education. For sure ministers of education in the Obasanjo era and even now in the Yar'Adua era are taking steps to sponsor policies of change in education for change in our socio cultural performance. Some of such policies include public-private-partnership in education (as in several other affairs of government, like telecommunication, information, security, and generation and distribution of energy); emphasis on early childhood and special need education which the National Council on education already approved during the era of Mrs. Ezekwesili as minister of education; in this connection early childcare education policies have been formulated such that

schools have been asked to designate one classroom each for early childcare development (ECCD) in the Maria Montessori fashion of education for the child⁵.

Mrs. Ezekwesili also made moves to consolidate all federal polytechnics and federal colleges of education as campuses of proximate universities whereby our polytechnics would no longer run Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes; they would only be running National Diploma (ND) programmes and students who wish to further their studies could then go into the proximate universities for degree programmes. In the process Yaba College of Technology and Kaduna Polytechnic are to be known as City University of Technology Yaba and City University of Technology Kaduna. In addition non-technical programmes that are run in the polytechnics would be dropped by the polytechnics⁶.

The above are only some of the many recent reforms in education in Nigeria, it would be important to look critically at these reforms and some of the others so as to examine the contributions they could realistically make to the development of Nigeria in socio-cultural perspective. In this connection what education is philosophically and how reforms of the nature we are undergoing in Nigeria can be of positive use to the nation would be philosophically analysed.

Education

Frankena's explanation of education involves an 'X' getting a 'Y' involved in disposition 'D' through method 'M'; wherein 'X' is the teacher that could be the individual teacher or the society; while 'Y' is the learner, that is the one that needs to know or those that need to know; and disposition 'D' involves worthwhile skills, attitudes, competences, knowledge and understanding; 'M' involves morally desirable method of getting the learner to have the worthwhile disposition⁷. Peters⁸, and Hirst and Peters⁹ also make assertions about this justification of education. Akinpelu¹⁰ has virtually the same thinking about this concept. They all make assertions about what education is, such that is definitely in the right direction.

In this regard it could be seen that in the Nigerian context our National Policies on Education have attempted to encourage Nigerians to acquire worthwhile dispositions (skills, attitudes, competences, knowledge, and understanding, etc.). But with each passing day our dispositions have to improve, they have to manifest the realization of further development in the global setting, thus the need for revision in our curriculum and our National Policies on Education. For instance, we did not need dexterity in the contemporary information and communication technology in our early years of independence but now we do, if we are to be relevant in the world perspective today. So also is the issue of appreciation of more generation of employment avenues to cope with the aspirations of multitude of graduates we are turning out of our tertiary institutions today with little prospects of gainful employment.

There are more considerations to examine. It is in this connection that it becomes important to take critical look at some of the recent reforms in the field of education in Nigeria. I will quickly add that the last eight years are of great interest to me in this study. This is probably because the last eight years witnessed contemporary development in our democracy; and democracy involves good governance – as opposed to military rule that Nigeria experienced for a long time after independence.

Reforms

The reforms in education in the last eight years include as discussed earlier, public-private-partnership in the running of education; integrated early childcare development programme in the elementary schools in the Maria Montessori fashion; and proposed consolidation of polytechnics and colleges of education with proximate universities. The others include Community Accountability and Transparency Initiative (CATI) whereby members of the public would know how much the government is allocating to every institution and ask questions on what the funds are spent on. All these were during Mrs. Ezekwesili's ministerial appointment as minister of education.

It was also during her tenure that Reports of Visitation Panels to higher institutions were made public, and reactions from the public encouraged on such reports, and steps were taken to work on such reactions. Another reform involves Operation Reach All Secondary Schools (ORASS); and yet another is Operation Reach All Primary Schools. To ensure that these last two are pursued with vigour she pursued the employment of about 40,000 NCE graduates to boost the UBE teacher requirement¹¹, and the training of over 80,000 teachers through teachers' development programmes during her ten months tenure as minister of education¹².

Moreover she stated that during that period 42.1 million Nigerian children were eligible for primary school education while only 22.3 million were in public schools¹³. Moreover there was need for the private sector to assist the government in running the schools at various levels. She said that the public-private-partnership campaign is to let people know that the schools belong to them and that community participation and ownership of schools would rekindle in the people the sense of belonging in programmes that influence the progress of the whole society. She stated that the schools are generally in a state of decay and they are not too far away from the people to rescue, they are within their various communities.

She further stated that development of the country does not depend on oil and gas but on education. How true this statement is; without education tapping the oil and gas resources would be elusive. Thus education is very crucial to national socio-cultural development of skills, competences, attitudes, knowledge and understanding. Her efforts in the provision of better education also resulted in her instituting ₦1 billion Competitive Research Grant to be managed by the Nigerian Academy of Science and Nigerian Academy of Education¹⁴. Besides, on the consolidation venture, the government is expected to spend ₦84.2 billion from which the 24 federal universities will get ₦17.5 billion, colleges of education ₦44.929 billion and polytechnics ₦21.82 billion; all for the provision of new infrastructures, equipment, rehabilitation, and refurbishment of serviceable non-functional facilities¹⁵.

It must be added that the former President Obasanjo was actively in support of all the above mentioned reforms in education, and the new President Yar'Adua is not against many of the reforms either. The consolidation issue is the one that Yar'Adua does not seem to actively support, although the fact is that he throws the matter open to the national assembly to decide upon, and there does not seem to be the same level of anticipation to pursue the consolidation reform as in the Obasanjo regime.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The issue now is, are the various reforms stated above in the right direction? Without the need to spell out the details again for want of space, they are to a large extent in the right direction. This is because they generally help to pursue reconsideration of the curricula in our various levels of education and to channel our national energies (public and private) towards greater accomplishment in the various levels of education; in terms of content of education, finance, monitoring, supervision, accountability, transparency, relevance for productivity and employment. Finally, the process also encourages in practical terms desire for moral rectitude in the pursuit of education. Thus it was an appreciable venture that Mrs. Ezekwesili got herself into when she got involved in the reforms in education. It is therefore recommended that the main thrust of the reforms be continued.

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