

An Assessment of the Implementation Process of the Nigerian Nine-Year Basic Education Curriculum

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Abstract

The Federal Government of Nigeria introduced a free, compulsory and continuous nine-year Universal Basic Education programme (UBE) in 2004, among other reasons, to respond to global and national challenges. As a result of this, the then primary and secondary school curricula were reorganized into a nine-year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) which encompasses subjects such as Cultural and Creative Arts, ICT, National Values, Technology, Mathematics, foundations in Vocational Studies, Entrepreneurship, Science etc. The implementation of BEC started in September 2008 and was revised after three years in order to ensure quality, accommodate some emerging challenges and merge some related subjects so as to reduce the load. The use of the new BEC started in September 2012. This paper attempts an assessment of the implementation process of the new BEC in terms of funding and instructional delivery process using the qualitative method of research. In this regard, it is observed that some factors such as inadequately educated and competent teachers, as well as poor learning environment still pose very serious threats to the success of the new nine-year BEC and its usage. It is recommended among other things that relevant authorities should ensure the adequacy of educated and competent teachers for the BEC programme and such teachers should be sufficiently motivated in line with global best practices.

Key words: basic education, curriculum, Nigeria, global challenges.

Introduction

Globally, education has been found to be the fulcrum around which national growth and development revolve. The challenges being faced by contemporary societies call for dynamism in educational processes geared towards solving societal issues. These issues, as captured in the Millennium Development Goals (Lomazzi, Borisch, & Laaser, 2012), include the attainment of Universal Basic Education (Adah, 2016). As a proactive step in addressing these challenges, the Nigerian government reviewed the curriculum of the basic education level in 2008 and 2014 respectively. The rationale behind these steps of the government in carrying out the two major curriculum initiatives became even more obvious when cognizance is taken of the key challenges that inform changes in education worldwide (Ojukwu, 2020) (Obioma, 2012). It is now some years that the Federal Government of Nigeria took the bold step of carrying out these two key curriculum reform initiatives, therefore, there is the need to appraise the curriculum and its implementation so far which is what has motivated this work.

Policy as a Concept

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Policy consists of a plan by some agents to do something specific whenever particular conditions obtain, for some purposes (Owolabi, 2005). Policies involve rules, guidelines, directions, principles, laws and regulations which say what is to be done, how it is to be done and for whom it is to be done in an organization, state or nation. They are usually developed as a result of the following:

- When fundamental societal needs are not met.
- When citizens are treated unfairly in a perpetual manner.
- If the existing policies and laws have outlived their usefulness.
- If the health, safety and education of the citizens are under threat.

There are different types of policy which include: organisational policy, insurance policy, education policy etc. Education policy refers to laws and processes of education system (curriculum planning and implementation) which are put in place for educational organisations such as local districts, states and nations to achieve academic goals.

The Concept of Curriculum

According to Ark (2017), curriculum refers to the knowledge and skills students are expected to develop, which include the learning objectives they are expected to attain, the lessons that teachers teach, the assignments and projects given to students, the materials used in a course and the tests and other methods used to evaluate students' learning. It is a total guided learning experience designed to facilitate learning for establishing quality relationship between what is learnt and what operates in the larger society (IGI Global, 2019). Kanowitz (2019) similarly defined curriculum as an educational framework outlining skill and content goals that need to be attained for each of the respective subject grades. Curriculum, therefore, involves systematic arrangement of educational activities aimed at achieving specific outcomes of the learning processes. Thus, curriculum planning determines the effectiveness of any educational system, be it at school, district, state or national level.

Historical Development of Educational Policy Formulation and Curriculum Planning in Nigeria

Educational policy statements and curriculum development in Nigeria are as old as education system itself and have passed through many stages, each coming with certain adjustment in one area or the other for improving the Nigerian educational system.

Before the arrival in Nigeria of the colonial masters, there were unique ways of training children and young adults in Nigeria, which responded to societal needs at that time. According to Oyeleke and Akinyeye (2013), the pre-colonial system of education encouraged competence, development and knowledge acquisition in Nigeria. Consequently, there was some form of curriculum planning to direct the type of training provided at that time. Although this could be termed informal or traditional curriculum, it had specific goals. As outlined by Fafunwa (2004), the pre-colonial traditional curriculum included:

- (i) development of the child's inherent physical skills;
- (ii) character education;
- (iii) inculcating in the child the culture of showing respect for elders and those in authority;
- (iv) developing intellectual skills;
- (v) acquisition of specific vocational training and developing a healthy attitude towards honest labour;
- (vi) developing a sense of belonging which enables active participation in family and community affairs; and
- (vii) understanding, appreciating and promoting cultural heritage of the community at large.

Pre-colonial period was succeeded by the era of the Missionaries, which introduced Western Education into Nigeria. The Missionaries replaced the traditional curriculum with a new one whose major goal was evangelization and Christianization of the people. Oyeleke and Akinyeye (2013) noted that the teacher during this era taught almost everything from the Bible to which every subject had to be related one way or another. Daniel-Kalio (2018), however, points out correctly that the missionary schools worked completely without a high standard and uniform curricula. As a result of this absence of very high standard and uniform curricula in the missionary schools, the colonial government stepped in and provided grant-in-aids for schools which later metamorphosed into the promulgation of an Education Ordinance in 1882 (Fafunwa, 2004). The 1882 Education Ordinance was to correct the inadequacies of the missionary education system by establishing substantial control over the activities of the Missions as well as the establishment of a General Board of Education, Local Board of Education and government schools. The 1882 Education Ordinance was, however, inadequate, as its curriculum content, methodology and language of instructional delivery were foreign to the Nigerian child (Daniel-Kalio, 2018).

As a result of these inadequacies, it became pertinent to formulate a completely Nigerian Education Ordinance to meet the needs of Nigerians more effectively, thus 1887 Education Ordinance was enacted. Adedokun (2004) as cited in Daniel-Kalio (2018) observed that the 1887 Education Ordinance brought massive improvement in the educational standards, which forced the missionary schools to also improve their own standards. The adverse effect on the missionary schools was some difficulty in opening new schools, thus enabling the government schools to have an upper hand. Other Education Ordinances enacted between 1887 and 1960 when Nigeria gain her independence include:

- The 1903 Education Code
- The 1905 Education Proclamation of Southern Nigeria
- The 1908 Education Ordinance
- The 1916 Education Ordinance
- The 1926 Education Code
- The 10-year National Development Plan of 1946
- The 1948 Education Ordinance
- The 1952 Education Ordinance
- The 1955, 1956 and 1957 Regional Education laws
- The 1960 National Educational Policy at Independence

After gaining the independence in 1960, there was an outcry from many Nigerians demanding that the education policy be revised to further satisfy the needs of Nigerians and not the needs of foreigners, (Madumere, 1999). This necessitated holding the 1969 National Curriculum Conference and the 1973 Seminar on Education. According to Nwauwa & Anyanwu (2000), the first major nationwide initiative at the basic education level was in 1976 when the Military Government under the leadership of General Olusegun Obasanjo launched the Universal Primary Education. In 1977 the government equally launched the National Policy on Education which contained chapters and sections on the philosophy and objectives of pre-primary, primary, secondary, technical, vocational, teacher, adult, formal, non-formal and tertiary levels of education (Oyebade, 2017).

The 1977 National Policy on Education became Nigeria's first Education Policy nationwide. Under this policy the Universal Primary Education (NPE) with the 6-5-4 system of Curriculum was introduced. In 1981, the Education Policy was again revised, ushering in the 6-3-3-4 system of curriculum where secondary school stage was divided into junior secondary and senior secondary schools. The junior stage became pre-vocational and academic, while the senior stage was meant for only those who have the ability and are willing to complete the six year-secondary education. Those who could not go into the senior school, went into apprenticeship out-of-school to continue with one pre-vocation or another (Madumere, 1999). Again, President

Olugesun Obasanjo, the initiator of UPE, launched the Universal Basic Education programme in Sokoto on September 30th 1999 where he observed that the UPE came across a number of unforeseen, but avoidable difficulties (Aigboje, 2007, Okuwa, 2007). With the introduction of Universal Basic Education programme, compulsory education for all Nigerian children and the 9-3-4 system of the curriculum was ushered in. This was followed by another revision in 2004 with the adoption of a free, compulsory and continuous 9-year Universal Basic Education (UBE), which was meant to be a vehicle to propel the nation towards the ideals of the Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Developmental Goals (MDG). Adeyanju, (2017) described the 2004 UBE as an innovative trend in Nigeria's educational framework particularly as it was programmed to be for nine years.

The education policy was further revised in 2008 and 2013, respectively, with the intention to address noticeable gaps in content and provisions of the policy. Following the 2013 revision, the Nigerian Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) launched the revised nine-year Curriculum for basic education level in 2014. The new curriculum was introduced by the Nigerian government to meet the demand of international best practices in education, emanating from multinational agreements in education, new national policies, changing social order and the globally accepted standards in education (Udofia, 2018). The curriculum equally takes into consideration the needs of the Nigerian society in line with the Millennium Development Goals, the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy and the Vision 20-20-20, the Education for All (EFA) goals, thus bridging the gaps in Science and Technology. In the words of Igbokwe (2015), the curriculum was developed in response to Nigeria's needs for relevant, dynamic and globally competitive education that would ensure that learners at the basic education level are capable of competing favourably anywhere in the world, in terms of knowledge, skills, techniques, values and aptitude.

Structure of the Reviewed Nine-Year BEC

The revised nine-year curriculum for basic education level was structured into three levels, namely:

- (i) Lower Basic Education Curriculum (Basic 1-3) for primary 1-3 (age 6-8 years),
- (ii) Middle Basic Education Curriculum (Basic 4-6) for primary 4-6 (age 9-11), and
- (iii) Upper Basic Education Curriculum (Basic 7-9) for Junior Secondary School (JSS 1-3) age 12-14. (NPE, 2013).

The following subjects are now offered under the nine-year curriculum in the categories of Lower, Middle, and Higher levels of Basic Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

Curriculum for Lower Basic Education (Primary 1 – 3):

- 1) English Studies
- 2) Mathematics
- 3) One major Nigerian Language (Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba)
- 4) Basic Science and Technology: Basic Science, Basic Technology, Information Technology, Physical & Health Education (PHE)
- 5) Religion and National Values Education: Social Studies, Civic Education, Religious Studies (CRS/IRK), Security Education
- 6) Cultural & Creative Arts (CCA)
- 7) Arabic Studies (Optional)

Curriculum for Middle Basic Education (Primary 4 – 6):

- 1) English Studies
- 2) Mathematics
- 3) One major Nigerian Language (Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba)

- 4) Basic Science and Technology: Basic Science, Basic Technology, Information Technology, Physical & Health Education (PHE)
- 5) Pre-Vocational Studies (PVS): Agricultural Science, Home Economics, Entrepreneurship Education
- 6) Religion and National Values Education: Social Studies, Civic Education, Security Education, Religious Studies (CRS/IRK)
- 7) Cultural & Creative Arts (CCA)
- 8) French Language
- 9) Arabic Studies (Optional)

Curriculum for Higher Basic Education (Junior Secondary School 1 – 3):

- 1) English Studies
- 2) Mathematics
- 3) One Nigerian Language (Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba)
- 4) Basic Science & Technology: Basic Science, Basic Technology, Information Technology, Physical & Health Education (PHE)
- 5) Prevocational Studies (PVS): Agriculture, Home Economics & Entrepreneurship Education
- 6) Religious and national Values Education: Civic Education, Religion Studies (CRS/IRS), Security Education & Social Studies
- 7) Cultural & Creative Arts (CCA)
- 8) Business Studies
- 9) French Language
- 10) Arabic Studies (Optional)

(Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

From the fore-going, the curriculum content is seen to be rich enough to give the students the necessary foundation for vocational and entrepreneurial skills. As pointed out by NERCD (2008), the curriculum is such that every learner who has gone through it should have acquired appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills; as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for a life-long learning. Similarly, the number of subjects offerings was reduced to not more than ten (10) which is in line with regional and global best practices as in Kenya – 7, Tanzania – 8, United States of America – 6, Malaysia and Indonesia 9 subject offerings (Igbokwe, 2015; Udofia, 2018).

The Implementation Process of the Reviewed Nine-Year BEC: An Assessment

Policy implementation refers to the systematic process of carefully translating the stated policy guidelines and strategies into action, the stage that is concerned with the actual experimentation, practice and demonstration of a planned course of action (Arop, Owan, & Ekang, 2018). Viennet and Pont (2017) see policy implementation as the administration of the laws, guidelines and procedures in which various actors, organization, procedures and techniques work together to put adopted policies into effect in an effort to attain the policy or programme goal. It is important that the basic components of any policy statement or guideline are well understood and adjudged adequate before delving into the implementation process.

Olateru-Olagbegi (2015) highlighted the basic components of the revised curriculum for basic education programme as follows:

- 1) Reduction of subject overload while still retaining quality in line with global best practice;
- 2) Elimination of subject matter overlap, repetitions and redundancies;

- 3) Division of subjects into core, compulsory, and elective subjects;
- 4) Thematic and spiral organization of content;
- 5) Systematic connection between primary and junior secondary school contents;
- 6) Introduction of Technology, Vocational subjects, Business Studies, Agriculture, French and Religious studies;
- 7) Inclusion of contents on global issues.

Olateru-Olagbegi (2015) mentioned that there have been certain improvements in the curriculum development process in primary and Junior Secondary School curriculum contents, when compared to the previous attempts of curriculum development in Nigeria. These are the laudable innovations seen as an improvement in planning and content. However, there are a number of factors inhibiting the implementation of this policy, among which are:

(i) Poor Instructional Delivery Process

The cardinal responsibility for the implementation of the curriculum lies with the teachers. According to Ejiogu (2009), the live wire of any educational system is the teacher whose quality invariably affects the quality of teaching. Adah (2016), however, observes correctly that these teachers operate under humiliating working conditions; their salaries are meager and are paid very irregularly. He observes further that they have no leave grants, no disturbance allowance, no millage claims, no housing allowance and it is not uncommon to find many teachers teaching under the shades of trees because there are no better alternatives. Adah (2016) further observes rightly that in some cases where there are classrooms as bare as a football field or worse, dilapidated, and in such conditions it is very difficult for the teacher to perform effectively. Besides, a good number of the teachers are not professionally qualified, some of those who are professionally trained are not competent enough, while those that are both trained and competent are demotivated and lack basic instructional materials to work with. According to the West African Examination Council (WAEC) Chief Examiners report (2014) as cited in Adah (2016), several factors are responsible for the falling standard of education in Nigeria, but there is no factor as crucial as the teacher. Otaru (2015) also points out that the key challenges facing the nine year BEC include the inadequate number of trained teachers in the Sciences, Technical and Vocational Subjects, unwillingness of most teachers to continue to develop themselves professionally so as to be abreast of global development in their various subjects, in the field of Teacher Education and education in general due to financial problems. Furthermore, while teachers in countries that have made remarkable progress in education such as Finland are selected from the top 10% of graduates, the teaching profession in Nigeria does not attract the best candidates due to the poor condition of service.

(ii) Inadequate Attention to Teacher Education and Qualifications

Also while the prescribed minimum teaching qualification for primary (elementary) school teachers in Nigeria is the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) which is lower than an undergraduate degree, the prescribed minimum qualification in Finland for teaching in the primary school is the Master's Degree (Sahlberg, 2007). With this scenario, if the dictum that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teacher is true (and it remains perpetually true), then the state of the 9-year Basic Education programme in Nigeria will remain at the same appalling level at which the Basic Education teachers in the country are. The success of Finnish schools has been attributed to (i) the adequacy of quality teachers who are also committed; (ii) the adequacy of instructional and infrastructural facilities; (iii) small class size; and (iv) student-centered approach to learning (Sahlberg, 2007). These factors also go a long way to confirm the truth of the dictum that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers. Incidentally these factors are grossly absent in Nigeria's revised Basic Education Programme.

(iii) Inadequate level of teaching Information Technology

One of the key areas of the revised 9-year Basic Education Curriculum is information technology. However, the current realities show that the level of computer literacy of the revised Basic Education teachers is very low (Adah, 2016). Many schools do not have computers, power supply remains very erratic in schools and only very few schools can afford the purchase of a generator as an alternative source of power supply. In a situation like this, teachers are compelled to handle information technology theoretically and that is far from the ideal.

(iv) The Issue of Compound and Single Subjects

Obioma (2012) observed correctly that some effort was made in the revised curriculum to address two fundamental issues: the curriculum of single subjects such as English or Mathematics and that of compound subjects (a combination of two or more previously taught single subjects). The internal assessments of the compound subjects' curriculum such as Basic Science and Technology, Religion and National Values and Pre-Vocational Studies pose very big challenges. Prior to the revision of the structure, this compound-subjects' curriculum incorporated topics treated as single subjects, for example, Basic Science and Technology had Basic Science, Basic Technology, Information Technology and Physical and Health Education. The fundamental question is whether one single score should be given to these compound subjects as the interpretation of students' achievement. While this is possible and is the easiest thing to do, it can never give the most useful insight into the performance of the students.

(v) Funding

Section 2, sub-section 12 of the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) has it that Basic Education shall be compulsory, free, universal and provide a high quality of learning/teaching. Olatunji (2018), however, points out that the talk about free education itself is a fallacy as result of the fact that free education does not exist in the real sense of the word. This is because the cost of education is not limited to the direct cost of education to the individual, but also includes the opportunity cost to the individual for receiving the education provided. The cost of education to the individual includes the purchase of school uniform, books, educational materials which the students may deem necessary for him/her to succeed, the cost of transportation to and from school (especially where the school is not located within a walking distance from home), the cost of supplementary lessons (to ensure an excellent performance at school), the cost of food (taken to ensure maximum concentration and good health) and the levies paid at school (however meager) to ensure the development of the school. Olatunji (2018) explains further that the cost of education to the individual also includes the opportunity costs, which are the amount of money that the individual would have earned or received, had the individual not gone to school. He explains that opportunity costs also include what the individual would have been doing, had he not gone to school. He argues that these are costs that are not borne and can hardly be borne by the government of Nigeria.

Furthermore, despite the professed free education programme of the government for Basic Education, the UNESCO-EFA Global Monitoring Report (2009 cited in Olatunji 2018) reveals that Nigeria has more basic education age children out of school than most countries globally. As at 2010, the number of children who are out of school in Nigeria stood at 8.7 million (UNESCO, 2015 cited in Olatunji, 2018). Similarly, UNICEF-UIS (2012 cited in Olatunji, 2018) has it that in Nigeria, two thirds of primary school age children in the poorest households are out of school, and of them, almost 90% will probably never enroll for Basic Education. The situation would have worsened as at the time of writing this paper due to insurgency in the north-eastern part of the country, general insecurity in the nation and the increasing wave of corruption in the country. Notwithstanding the alarming number of out of school children in Nigeria who are persistently refusing to participate in the Basic Education programme, no parent has ever been reprimanded, fined or imprisoned for not ensuring that his/her child is in school to participate in the Basic

Education programme that the government tagged compulsory. These happenings and reports indicate a contradiction between the theory and practice of the 9-year Basic Education programme in Nigeria.

(vi) Insecurity

Insecurity has been found to be a major challenge associated with the implementation of the Nigerian 9-year Basic Education programme, as it has been found to be one of the factors that has continued to cripple various aspects of the nation's economy, especially the education sector. For instance, the chronicle of school abductions between 2014 and 2021 when 200 Chibok girls were abducted in 2020 and in 2021 1,102 Nigerian students and pupils have been abducted (Owonikoko, 2021). Security in Nigeria has so deteriorated that on a daily basis, there is some news of either a bomb blast, a suicide bombing, an assassination or a mass murder. Boko-Haram terrorists, for instance, have rendered the nation's security agencies almost useless at one point or another (Aina, 2020). The effect of insecurity on Nigerian education as observed by Carpenter, Shua and Ibrahim (2020) ranges from high school dropout, non-supervision of academic activities, loss of lives (students' and teachers'), low school enrollment and exodus of good brains (teachers' and school administrators') to other countries that are relatively safe and peaceful. The implication of these is that many Nigerian children who would have become future leaders are out of school, school inspectors no longer feel safe to move around conducting periodic inspections of academic activities and many parents in the country, especially in the north-eastern part of it, have given up sending their children to school, thus disrupting the implementation process of the nine-year basic education curriculum.

The Learning Outcomes of the Nine Year Basic Education Curriculum

Learning outcomes are the extent at which students exhibit the desired learning needs (Ayodele & Oyinloye, 2019). It is to be determined by the teacher through assessment, which may be by grading or other means. Ayodele and Oyinloye explained further that there must be evidence of student application of what they have learnt in new situation and the desire to continue learning.

The Philosophy of the 9-year Basic Education Curriculum entails that every learner who has gone through 9- years of basic education should have acquired appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life skills, as well as ethical, moral and civil values (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2008)

Similarly Universal Basic Education Commission (2012) has it that at the end of the junior Secondary Education it is expected that:

- at least 50% of learners who enroll for Basic Education Certificate will achieve at least a credit pass in the core subjects which will enable them to acquire knowledge and skills for higher level of education;
- all learners will be able to cultivate useful living in the society;
- all learners will develop talents and opportunities for future roles;
- all learners will be able to apply science, technology and commerce in sub-professional trades;
- all learners would have access to a range of vocational educational opportunities;
- all learners would have acquired ICT skills; and
- all learners would have acquired diverse basic knowledge and skills for entrepreneurship and educational advancements.

Ige (2014), however, submits that it is not a gainsaying that the achievement of the expected outcomes remains low in Nigeria. He explains that the education that is offered to students is unable at this level to impact meaningful skills, thus making the school graduates to be mere certificate holders.

Humphreys & Crawford (2015) state that overall, the evidence base on outcome of basic education in Nigeria is weak. According to them, there is no nationally institutionalized system for the regular measurement of learning outcomes. They observed further, that those measures that do exist suggest very low learning levels. For example, nearly half (46%) of children who have completed primary school are not able to read a complete sentence (National Population Commission & Right to Information International, 2011). Longitudinal tests and surveys measuring individuals' skills across time would improve the understanding of the progress (or lack thereof) that pupils/students are making, and in which years it occurred. These, according to NPC & RTI International, are not available for usage within the Basic Education system in Nigeria. In addition, national school examinations are not taken until the end of senior secondary school (ESSPIN, 2009)

Johnson (2010) also argues that teachers obviously need capacity building in assessing pupils' work and progress as evidenced in recent assessments carried out on primary teachers in the Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (SSPIN-supported) states. He explains that diagnostic tests of over 21,000 primary teachers' ability to monitor and assess pupils' learning in Lagos state revealed that 38.6% were unable to use an assessment guide to correct two authentic pieces of primary-level pupil writing, while 15% were only able to use the guide in a "limited" way. He explains further that the results would seem to indicate that teachers have problems assessing pupils' work. This, he argues, is not surprising given the teachers' low level of literacy - only 34% were deemed to have "sufficient" or near "sufficient" basic literacy skills. An earlier assessment of primary school teachers in Kwara State came up with similar results (Johnson, 2008). Against this backdrop, the absence of reliable data on pupils' attainment as confirmed by Action Aid (2011, 2012) is seen correctly by Johnson (2010) as unsurprising. In addition, teachers also have difficulty in implementing the policy of Continuous Assessment (CA) which is an integral aspect of the Basic Education Curriculum (2012).

Nationwide Monitoring of Learning Achievement (MLA) studies that were carried out in 1996, 2001, 2004 and 2006, all showed very low learning outcomes (Federal Ministry of Education, 2010). National mean percentage test scores attained by primary 4 children in the first study in 1996 were 32% in numeracy and 25% in literacy. National mean score at the JSS level in 2004 were 25% in Mathematics and 32% in English (Federal Ministry of Education, 2010). The 2009 Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN) reports that, to the extent that these results are comparable with other countries, the 2004 results were the worst in Africa.

Similarly, Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) conducted a series of national assessments: In 2001 in English and Mathematics in Primary 4 (UBEC, 2001); in all four core subjects in all three upper primary grades in 2003 (UBEC, 2007), and in Primary 6 and in all three JSS grades in 2006 (UBEC, 2009). In all three assessments pupils' marks were generally very low and it was reported that their low level of English prevented many of them from understanding test instructions (UBEC 2007; 2009).

According to NPC and RTI International, in 2010 Nigeria Education Data Survey (NEDS) provides a simple measure of literacy: a person who can read aloud all or part of a sentence in one of the three main Nigerian languages or in English is considered to be literate. It was alluded that while this is not a very robust test, it does cover a nationally representative sample. A World Bank analysis indicates that even according to this not so robust test, two thirds of children remain illiterate after primary six, with even much higher figures for the North Eastern part of the country that has been engulfed with security challenges for the past many years (Global Education First Initiative, 2013).

ESSPIN produced original data on learning outcomes in the six states (Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kwara and Lagos) it supports through the 2012 Composite Schools Survey (ESSPIN 2013). The report found that, although ESSPIN-supported schools were doing better than control schools, learning outcomes' level is still very low. Overall, just 4% of primary 4 students had skills for reading comprehension and just 7% of primary 4 students were able to perform primary 4-level arithmetic. Of very serious concern was the finding that almost half of primary 4 pupils do not understand basic number concepts very well after being in

the school for four years. Similarly, quite discouraging was the finding that as children progress through school, an ever increasing proportion falls below the appropriate standard of numeracy and English literacy (ESSPIN 2013, p.14).

The final early grade literacy and numeracy assessments in Sokoto and Bauchi conducted under United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded by Northern Education Initiative (NEI) also produced appalling results (USAID 2013a, b). The assessments were administered to a sample of primary 2 and primary 3 pupils in forty public schools and to a sample of stage 1 and stage 2 pupils in forty Islamiyya Quranic and Tsangaya Education (IQTE). The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in Hausa (the usual medium of instruction for primary 1 to 3 in Northern Nigeria and the local language of all the pupils tested in Sokoto and more than 80% of the pupils tested in Bauchi) was administered to a sample of primary 3 pupils in Bauchi and Sokoto states. This assessment found that the vast majority of primary 2 and 3 pupils have not mastered any foundational reading skills in either English or Hausa in either government or IQTE schools.

The foundational skills measured in the assessment were letter-sound identification, on-word reading, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. The specific findings were:

- Over 50% scored zero in subtasks: 80 to 90% scored zero for some grades and skills;
- Pupils in Bauchi performed better than those in Sokoto;
- Pupils in IQTE schools performed better on average than pupils in government schools, especially in Hausa.
- Pupils' score increased from grade to grade but the additional year of schooling did not produce meaningful gains (USAID 2013a).

The 2013 USAID Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) results were similarly poor, while again the pupils in IQTE schools fared slightly better. Most pupils scored zero in the subtasks, which asked pupils to identify numbers, do simple addition and subtraction, discriminate between quantities, complete missing numbers in a sequence, and solve mathematical problems orally (word problem). The pupils performed much better in the contextualized orally given word problem, suggesting children have the capacity to do better if teachers make the linkage between real life context and abstract concepts (USAID 2013 a & b).

Generally, the evidence from the literature is consistent in concluding that learning outcomes are weak in both literacy and numeracy, but they are weaker in literacy, even when literacy is assessed in a language other than English. In contrast, pupils' oral skills in their mother tongue and or language of the immediate environment fared better, and this points to the need to incorporate more oral work into both literacy and numeracy teaching (Humphreys & Crawford, 2015). UNICEF (2021) reechoed the issue of out of school children in Nigeria, as it reveals that even before COVID-19 hit, 10.5 million children among them (6.3 million girls) were not in school despite primary education being free and compulsory. It goes again to confirm the findings of Humphreys and Crawford (2015) about learning outcomes in respect of the 9-year Basic Education in Nigeria, as it reveals that 70% of pupils who are in school were not achieving basic foundational literacy and numeracy skills. It also points out that the absence of a responsive learning assessment is one of the underlying causes of poor education outcomes in the country. It emphasizes that real-time data is needed to gauge what students know and what areas they are still lagging behind in.

Similarly, Yaji & Abilabo (2020), in their study on the effectiveness of National Values Basic Education Curriculum implementation, report that while the curriculum itself is okay, there is a decline in the democratic tendencies of students. This, they said, could be due to the non-internalization of what the curriculum teaches. In addition, Ayodele & Oyinloye (2019) examine the implementation of Basic Education Yoruba Language Curriculum. The findings of the study, among other things, show that there is a great deficiency in the acquired learning experience and the desired learning outcomes.

Discussion

As shown in the preceding paragraphs, the implementation process of Nigeria's Universal Basic Education Curriculum is still fraught with challenges, especially with respect of low level of learning outcomes. For comparison, the situation of Basic Education in Gambia (a West African Country like Nigeria) is equally not very encouraging. The national curriculum, introduced in 2002, replaced the previous one primary-junior secondary- and senior secondary system, which emphasized primary education and introduced a certificate given to its graduates. The current system guarantees automatic promotion to grade 9 (9-year education is compulsory), and applies mandatory assessments for grades 3, 5 and 8 (National Assessment Test or NAT). At the end of the basic education cycle children take The Gambia Basic Education Certificate Examination - GABECE. The GABECE comprises up to 10-11 subjects.

According to Gambia Education Country Status Report (UNESCO, 2011), Gambian learning outcome scores are very low. As an example, in 2009, 54 per cent of the assessed Grade 2 students were not able to read a single word, which was also the case for 27 per cent of Grade 3 students. As a result of this, many of the pupils were not adequately equipped to learn other subjects. In the National Assessment Test, few students reached the minimum requirements and success rates varied between 45.7 per cent for Grade 5 Social Studies and 19.5 per cent for Grade 3 English. In addition to English, the situation is particularly disturbing in Grade 5 Mathematics and Sciences, with average success rates of just 20 per cent. At Grade 9 examination for Senior Secondary School admission, 75 per cent of candidates failed to obtain a credit in any of the four core subjects, and only 4 per cent achieved a credit in all four. Results are poorest in Mathematics with only 7 % of the candidates obtaining a credit. Furthermore, the Ministries of Basic and Secondary Education and Higher education, Research Science and Technology (2017) reveal that educational attainment has been recently improving, but still remains low. The quality of education, according to the Ministries (ibid), children in rural areas are disadvantaged with regard to access to education and completion of education at all levels. The Ministries also point out that international comparison of educational attainment; reveal that Gambia has one of the lowest educational attainment in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA). 58% of the population has never been to school compared to the SSA average of 33%. This places Gambia among the bottom ten countries in SSA with poor educational attainment.

The situation of Basic Education in Ghana (also a West-African country), especially with respect to learning outcomes, while not excellent, is relatively fair. Balwanz and Darvas (2014) report that in the past 15 years, in addition to expanding access and improving equity, Ghana has also committed to improving basic education quality. National Literacy Accelerated Programme (NALAP) is a transitional bilingual literacy program in 11 Ghanaian languages for implementation in grades KG-P3. NALAP curriculum and materials focus on improving literacy learning through mother tongue instruction in Kindergarten through third grade with an early transition to English. According to Balwanz and Darvas, in 15 years, basic education enrolment has increased by 2 million pupils and learning outcomes as measured by National Education Assessment (2005-2011) and the Trend in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have realized a slight increase. Larger numbers of primary grade 6 pupils are gaining proficiency in English and Mathematics and many of these pupils are progressing to Junior High School and Senior High School. A significant number of new classrooms, water points and sanitation facilities have also been constructed, creating safer and healthier learning environments. In 2011 National Education Assessment (NEA), 35 per cent of primary grade 6 tested at proficiency level in English and 16 per cent tested at proficiency level in Mathematics. Balwanz and Darvas (2014), however, point out that, while these scores represent a slight upward trend, they fall far below Ministry of Education's (MoE) targets for primary grade 6 student numeracy and literacy

There is an obvious need in Nigeria and in her neighboring countries of Gambia and Ghana to be more proactive concerning the implementation process of Basic Education, especially the aspect of learning outcomes. Going by the discussion in the preceding paragraphs, the progress being made in reducing learning poverty is too slow. In describing the learning crisis

in Africa, the World Bank submits that “37 million African children will learn so little in school that they will not be much better off than kids who never attend school” (2018 World Development Reports). If care is not taken, and quickly too, this concern expressed by the World Bank dealing with learning crisis in Africa will be confirmed in Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, and many other African countries. Furthermore, in what looks very much like a very bitter and unpleasant truth, the World Bank’s estimates have it that even if countries were to maintain their fastest rates of progress observed in recent decades, learning poverty will not be eliminated by 2030. The World Bank rightly argues that this requires a major rethinking of education. While the authors agree with the view of the World Bank as expressed, the said rethinking, they opine, needs to be done without a further delay.

Incidentally, while Nigeria is “grappling” with learning poverty as discussed in the proceeding paragraphs, Cuba, which is equally a developing country like Nigeria is breaking new grounds and making news in educational development (inclusive Basic Education). The record of Cuban education is outstanding: universal school enrolment and attendance; nearly universal adult literacy, proportional female representation at all levels; a strong scientific training base, consistent pedagogical quality across classrooms; equality of basic education opportunity, in impoverished areas, both urban and rural (Gasperini, 2000). Cuba’s current literacy rate and exam scores are more similar to those of developed countries than to those of other developing countries (Hale, 2018). For instance, Cuba’s literacy rate is among the highest in the world at 99.8% and in a recent regional study of Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba ranked first in Mathematics and Science achievement. Additionally, Cuba has 94% of her children attending pre-K, 100% reaching the sixth grade, and 99% of students reaching the ninth grade (Cuba Diplomata, 2015).

In Cuba students attend primary school for seven years (preschool through sixth grade) and basic secondary school for three years (seventh through ninth grade). In all, basic education is ten years in Cuba and is free in terms of cost (Class Base, 2012). While the cost of education in Nigeria and some developing counties restricts access to education for some students, especially students of low income parents, in Cuba, education is free and there is no differentiation in content level or task intensity of lessons taught to high and low income students (Hale, 2018). As a result of this, while 38% of Cuban schools are rural and composed of low-income students with less educated parents, there are few differences in student performance between these rural schools and urban schools (Martin, 2007).

Over the years, the outcomes have proven impressive: for instance, Cuba is ranked highest among eleven Latin American countries with an Education for All Development Index (EDI) of 0.981 and is the only Latin American and non-English speaking Caribbean country considered by UNESCO as achieving Education for All (EFA) goals, which is based on an EDI of 0.98 or higher (UNESCO, 2006). Included among the 98 countries that ranked below Cuba are Denmark, Luxemburg, Portugal, and China. UNESCO (2006) also shows that Cuba contributes a significantly higher percentage of its gross national product (GDP) to education than any other country selected for comparison. In addition, of the data available in UNESCO 2006 report, only five countries exceed Cuba in total public expenditure on education as a percentage of GNP. Furthermore, a report published by UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2006) shows that Cuba has nearly 100% enrolment and survival rates in primary school and the highest secondary school enrolment rate among eleven Latin American and Caribbean countries.

If Cuba, a developing nation like Nigeria can achieve such success in education (including Basic Education), it follows that hope is not lost for Nigeria in turning around her Basic Education sector and other sectors of her educational system around for good, if only the government will put her house in order in the real sense of the word and also see specific lessons that could be learnt from the Cuban experience.

Gasperini (2000) explains that Cuban educational system has been performing so well, even under severe resource constraints of the past decade, because of the continuity in her education strategies, sustained high level of investments in education, and a comprehensive and carefully structured system characterized by:

- Quality-based education and universal access to primary and secondary school;
- Comprehensive early childhood and student health programs (established as part of the commitment to basic education);
- Comprehensive and functional educational program for those outside school-literacy, adult and non-formal education (again as part of basic education commitment);
- Mechanism to foster community participation in the management of schools;
- Great attention to teachers (extensive pre- and in-service training, high status and moral incentive, transparent system of accountability, strategies for developing a culture of professionalism, reward for innovation);
- Low-cost instructional materials of high quality;
- Teacher and student initiative in adapting national curriculum and developing instructional materials locally;
- Carefully structured competition that enhances the system rather than the individual;
- Explicit strategies to reach rural students and students with special needs.
- Strategies to link school and work; and
- An emphasis on education for social cohesion.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In conclusion, the revised nine-year BEC is adjudged an improvement over the previous attempts in terms of curriculum content. The curriculum content is rich enough to give the students the necessary foundation for vocational and entrepreneurial skills. It is however an open secret that the state of Basic Education teachers in Nigeria relative to global best practices is very appalling and the system itself is grossly underfunded. The earlier these issues are addressed, the better for the revised 9-year Basic Education programme that “has been tied down” and kept from moving to great heights by the qualification of the teachers. The Federal government of Nigeria will, therefore, be doing the nation a lot of good, if necessary and timely attention is given to Basic Education teachers as well as Basic Education as a system. This, if done, it will keep the revised 9-year Basic Education Curriculum from becoming a white elephant project. Specifically, attention should be focused on the following areas:

- 1) As a matter of urgency, government should put in place a nationally institutionalized system for regular measurement of learning outcomes. The absence of this is a very critical missing link in the implementation process of the revised 9-year Basic Education Curriculum.
- 2) The very appalling state of learning outcomes at all levels of Basic Education in Nigeria should be addressed forthwith to prevent further depreciation of the situation.
- 3) There is the need to improve on the remuneration of the basic education teachers so as to attract quality teachers. The qualification of teachers and their work are a key factor that can make or mar the entire programme. Incidentally, Basic Education teachers in the country do not have the history of going on strike like the members of the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities to get the government to improve their lot and give sufficient attention to the nation’s University Education system, where they are involved for the good of the nation. While the authors are not advocating strike actions as the best method of addressing labour issues, it will not be in the interest of Basic Education teachers in the country and the entire citizenry, if these teachers decide to keep mute while the system is gradually collapsing. They can persistently engage the relevant authorities in a meaningful dialogue until their demands are met.
- 4) It is also suggested that special attention be given to security issues in the entire country and most especially in the northern part of the country. The fact that insecurity has made the four walls of most schools in the northern part of the country a no-go area has further widened the educational imbalance between the southern part of Nigeria and the northern part thus reinforcing political and social tension in the country. Similarly, necessary infrastructures should be

provided for schools in rural and urban areas as soon as the environments made safe for teaching and learning activities. While the government is working toward ensuring safe environments for teaching and learning, government could correspondingly introduce home-schooling as an alternative system, engage teachers in work within this system and remunerate them handsomely. This will ensure that pupils and students of school age do not miss the opportunity of being educated pending the time when the unpleasant tide of insecurity will be fully stemmed. Furthermore, indigenous scholars should be encouraged to write books on all the areas of the revised curriculum taking cognizance of the contemporary happenings in Basic Education globally.

- 5) Another area that requires attention is the issue of compound and single subjects. There is need to always carry out curriculum reforms correspondingly with pedagogical reforms. It is suggested that scores be awarded for each theme in order to give proper interpretation of learner's achievement as well as to enable teachers operate with uniform and prescribed assessment modalities.

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