

Issues of Basic Education in Nigeria: Need for Inclusion of Multigrade Instructional Strategy in School Curriculum for Effective Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The paper attempts to discuss the issue of the quality of education in the Nigerian basic school system. It looks into the global yearning for provision and acquisition of quality education for all in societies of the world. Jomtien declaration on Education for All and Sustainable Development Goal 4 which centres on provision of quality education for all are some of the global protocols and agreements reached by societies of the world for improvement in provision of quality education. The paper therefore explores the need for classroom teachers to effectively use multigrade instructional strategy for achievement of global educational aspiration. It discussed the concept multigrade as an instructional strategy which equips a teacher with necessary teaching skills and techniques that enables him or her to effectively teach two or more classes at the same time. Also examined are the relationships between the use of multigrade instructional strategy and cost of education. Considering the vital roles teachers play in implementation of school program, the paper examined their preparation and its effect on school curriculum. The paper concludes that due to complexities in developing societies arising from population explosion resulting to scarcity of resources which affects provision of education to populace, there is need for teachers to be well equipped with up-to-date instructional strategies to cope with the challenges. It therefore recommends that: basic school teachers should be trained on the use of modern instructional strategies that could enhance effective classroom activities in multigrade schools; multigrade instructional strategy should be adequately taught and also its values be exposed to students at colleges of education and faculties of education in universities; and that flesh colleges of education graduates who are employed in rural schools should expose the ideas and benefits of multigrade instructional strategy to the schools' administrators.

Keywords: curriculum, education, instruction, learning, multigrade, teaching

Basic education, popularly known as Universal Basic Education (UBE) is considered a foundation to the entire educational system in Nigeria. This is because all other levels of education are anchored on it. It is not just a basic tool acquisition of knowledge, skills, value and attitude, but is universal as everybody irrespective of peculiarities needs to pass through for development of self-confidence, harmonious relation and ability to contribute meaningfully to the development of the society. It comprises of lower, middle and upper basic

classes which are made up of primary 1-3, 4-6 and Junior secondary school (JSS) 1-3 respectively. Basic education emerged from a series of curriculum innovations that have taken place in the country. The country has witnessed a pool of innovation in the school system ranging from the pre-colonial, Islamic, Christian missionaries, colonial to postcolonial era. The federal government of Nigeria introduced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in 1999 following the Jomtien declaration of 1990 on Education for All. The philosophy behind introduction of the programme in the country is to ensure access to fundamental education at no cost to the beneficiaries (Irigonen, 2017). The essence is to eradicate illiteracy and to a large extent eliminate ignorance as well as extreme poverty in the society.

According to Buchi (2017) the basic aspect of the UBE connotes the very foundation of education, which all other levels are built upon. The universal aspect of it connotes the fact that education is vital to people all over the world. The free aspect of the scheme refers to the need for every child to have access to education, regardless of his or her financial status. The federal government initiative on introduction of UBE programme no doubt is a laudable one as it aims among other things to enable all Nigerians of school going ages to have access to basic education without barriers.

However, a critical observation on the implementation of UBE curriculum in rural area leaves much to desire. This is particularly due to lack of teachers in the areas because of attrition (Okeke et al., 2019). It is common to see only two to three teachers teaching a full cycle of primary school due to lack of equal number of teachers that would have been teaching each of the classes. The most affected areas are those dominated by migrate fishermen, peasant farmers and nomadic Fulani (Abioye, 2021). Despite these challenges, the main aim of UBE is to ensure that all children irrespective of their geographical and cultural disadvantages should have access to formal education. Consequently, there is need to adopt an instructional strategy in the school curriculum that could equip teachers with necessary skills that would enable them to effectively teach two or more classes at the same time in the same learning space.

To address this challenge, the Nigerian government in the year 2000 adopted multigrade instructional strategy that could be used in the implementation of basic school curriculum in nomadic and other schools established particularly in the rural areas (Ogbonna, 2004). This was a measure to ensure that all school-going age children in the country have access to basic education irrespective of their cultural or geographical disadvantages. The instructional strategy equips teachers with teaching techniques that could enable them effectively teach two or more classes at the same time in the same classroom or learning space. The major strength of this strategy is that the challenge of inadequate number of teachers as commonly found in rural areas due to continuous attrition is addressed, therefore making it possible for learners in such areas to have access to quality basic education for the achievement of quality education for all.

It is pertinent to mention here that the preparation of classroom teachers who take the responsibility of curriculum implementation is vital as its success or failure is the function of their knowledge and ability to put the designed learning experiences to use in a classroom setting. Cronin-Jones (1991)

observes that knowledge of teachers on a programme enhances their belief system, which accounts significantly for its implementation. In other words, a teacher like any other person seems to appreciate more of what he has a sound knowledge of. When this notion is to be examined in the light of curriculum implementation, it may be deduced that the level of awareness of a teacher on the nature and intricacies of a school programme could extol much influence on his ability to effectively put such a programme to use in a classroom.

It is therefore the intention of this paper to examine the possibility of repositioning basic education in Nigeria by including instructional strategy in basic school curriculum in the country.

Concept of Multigrade Teaching

The concept multigrade teaching has been variously defined particularly as it relates to its operation in different societies. This is because the practice of the instructional strategy defers from place to place, and this therefore goes a long way in depicting the names which such practices are known by. Little (2006) reports that the concept is referred differently to as multi-level, multiple class, composite class, vertical grouping, family class, mixed year, combination class, double graded, split class, multiple ability, non-graded class, non-fixed class, ungraded class, multigrade and unitary class. The different names as mentioned above only portray the fact that multigrade teaching is a widely used technique of teaching in many societies of the world and each society refers to it based on how it is practised at a particular time.

Another important point to note about multigrade teaching is that it is viewed differently by different educationists, and as such has various definitions. UNESCO (2002) defines multigrade teaching as that which takes place in schools where pupils of different grades are taught in a single classroom. Furthermore, such school pupils of two or more grades are taught by one teacher in the same teaching space.

Multigrade teaching is not a new instructional strategy to teaching, what is however new are the emerging techniques that could be best used to organise or implement it with better results. It is against this backdrop that Balogun (2005) observed that the concept of multigrade teaching cannot be said to be completely new because many teachers may have been involved in teaching more than one class or grade without knowing that they are carrying out multigrade teaching.

This assertion could make more meanings if examined in the light of what goes on even in mono-grade or conventional schools where sometimes situations would compel a teacher to combine two or more classes and teach them despite the expectation that the number of teachers in such schools has to be equivalent to that of the available classes. Such a situation may arise when one or more teachers may go on sick, medical, casual, study, maternity or annual leave, therefore creating a loophole in the balance between the number of teachers and classes in the school. In such a situation, one teacher may combine two or more classes and teach in order to avoid neglect and loss of learning activities the pupils would have suffered at that particular time. The teacher at this instance may be carrying out multigrade teaching without

realising it and at the same time may be not be employing the right techniques that are used in a multigrade situation.

Apart from those conditions that could call for the temporal use of multigrade teaching in schools as enumerated above, there are other long-term challenges that can pose obstacles to the provision of access to basic education that multigrade could readily serve as an answer. Education generally is a right that every citizen is expected to benefit from (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) if members of such a society are to be useful to themselves and also contribute positively to the progress of the society. It was on this basis that between 5th and 9th March, 1990, nations of the world met at Jomtien City, in Thailand to declare 'Education for All' for all the people of the world, the declaration popularly known as Jomtien Declaration of 1990 (Osstveit, 2000). At the end of the conference, 1500 delegates representing 150 countries of the world, 137 non-governmental organisations, 32 inter-governmental organisations including the United Nations arrived at this protocol agreement as presented below:

We commit ourselves to act cooperatively through our own spheres of responsibility taking all necessary steps to achieve the goals of Education for All. Together we call on all governments concerned, organisations and individuals to join this urgent undertaking. The basic learning needs can and must be met. There has never been a more propitious time to commit ourselves to providing basic learning opportunities for all the people of the world (World Conference on Education for All, 1990).

However, it could be noted that various societies have been confronted by different challenges in the implementation of this protocol agreement, particularly in remote rural areas. For instance, following the closure of cod fishing in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, there was a mass exodus of people from these areas and the number of children of school-going age left behind became too small for establishment of conventional schools (Scott, 2012). The only option left for Canadian government to implement Education for All as compliance to the global protocol agreement was the establishment of multigrade schools for the teeming population in the area.

Despite the loftiness of the components of Universal Basic Education as stated above, there are challenges militating against the implementation process in the country. These challenges emanated principally from the cultural and geographical setting of most of the people who are supposed to be beneficiaries of the programme. For instance, the children of nomads, migrant fishermen and peasant farmers who are equally part of the Nigerian population and by implication those who are to benefit from the programme, found themselves in disadvantaged situations owing to their parents' occupations and settlements.

Nomads' source of livelihood compels them to move from one place to another in search for greener pastures for their herd, while the migrant fishermen equally move to places as dictated by the movement of tide which controls the availability of fish. The children of peasant farmers consistently

stay on the farm supporting their parents, therefore making it difficult for them to attend conventional schools.

In order to address these challenges, it becomes inevitable for government to introduce multigrade teaching in the Nigerian school system. It was against this premises that objectives of multigrade teaching were clearly spelt out in the manual produced after a conference organised for primary school teachers in Nigeria in 2003. These objectives include: 1) creation of access to education for all children 2) desire to achieve the global policy of education for all at rural areas irrespective of people's culture and geographical disadvantages 3) to solve the problem of insufficient teachers at rural areas where two or three teachers can manage a whole school cycle and bring school closer to communities. The lofty objectives as stated above are meant for the provision of access to basic quality education in Nigeria.

Multigrade Teaching and Cost of Quality Basic Education

One of the major goals of governments of the world societies is to ensure that citizens have access to quality basic education. It is this premise that informs Ajibola's (2008) postulation that the provision of basic education to all citizens is an issue that has to be viewed seriously, particularly in Nigeria where a large number of nomads, female children, women, al-majiri, street children and disabled people are out of schools. Nicholas (2005) is of the view that it is extremely important that girls particularly should have access to basic education as every additional year a girl attends school means 20 percent increase in her wages and 10 percent reduction in child mortality. This is because women with formal education are more likely to seek medical care, ensure their children are immunized, be much informed of nutritional requirements, and adopt improved sanitation practices. As a result, their children stand better chances of surviving mortality.

The International Centre for Research on Women is of the opinion that the education a girl receives, is a strong predictor of the age she will marry and is a critical factor in reducing the prevalence of child marriage. The World Bank estimates that an additional year of formal education of schooling for 1000 women helps prevent two maternal deaths and two additional years of formal education that a mother completes translate into her children staying in school and an additional one-third to half a year (UNICEF, 2007).

Looking at the benefits accrued from the acquisition of formal education, it has therefore become unavoidable for Federal Government of Nigeria and other concerned individuals and groups of individuals to strive as much as possible to ensure that all children including those in hard-to-reach areas have access to basic education that is qualitative and cost effective. Birch and Larry (1995) are of the view that multigrade instructional strategy is another effective means of providing access to education. This is because multigrade schools are smaller and can be cheaply established than the mono-grade schools. Apart from that, many of such schools could be established close to settlements where children live, therefore improving the level of their attendance. This means that even younger ones can attend and the time children spend travelling between the school and home can be reduced.

Apart from viewing multigrade teaching in the angle of proximity to settlements as an added advantage, particularly in regard to provision of access to basic education, it also helps in alleviating the problem of finance as its establishment is cost effective. School funding has been a major challenge, particularly when consideration is given to the current global economic challenges where many nations find it cumbersome to provide basic social services to the citizens. This becomes more burdensome as the cost of providing infrastructure, payment of teachers' salaries and purchase of instructional materials is at variance with revenue generation. The challenge posed by school financing has led to the emergence of, among other ones, two economic schools of thought questioning who should bear the burden or cost of the provision of education.

As observed by Adedeji (2009) the first economic school of thought postulates that the cost of education should be borne essentially by parents with government providing enabling environment. The school argues that education should be subjected to free market discipline and families and individuals have to pay fees in order to access the available services, otherwise it would not be available or its quality would become low. However, it should be noted that the problem with this theory is that less privileged members of the society will not have access to basic education since they will not be able to pay for it.

Another school of thought posits that education is the right of all citizens and has to be funded by government (Evan, 2022). The argument advanced by proponents of this theory is that there are enough resources to fund education if not for the corrupt attitude of people, misplaced priority, inequality and poor policy choices. Based on this argument, education should not only be free but also compulsory for all citizens. By implication the advocates of this theory (Evan, 2022; Hillman & 2004) are of the view that government should bear the cost of providing education such as payment of teachers' salaries, provision of infrastructure, supervision, provision of uniforms, books, feeding among others for effective teaching and learning. In a nut shell, it is the obligation of governments to make education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to the citizens. Multigrade teaching is a strategy that strikes a balance between the two economic theories on financing of education in modern societies. This is because it is expected that the introduction of the instructional strategy would help in alleviating the economic burden of both families and government in terms of provision of basic education to members of society. The strategy will help in relieving the financial burden of families on the ground that multigrade schools are established closer to settlement. This therefore means that the economic stress of transporting the children to far schools and time wastage will be resolved. The children will equally have time after the school hours to support their parents in the economic ventures they are undertaking. This could not only reduce their economic burden but rather improve their standard of living.

The strategy is of significant economic value to government in the provision of access to basic education to the populace. This is because the establishment of multigrade schools is cost effective, and therefore could help government in attending to other issues like the provision of health care, roads and other things as welfare to the citizens. Multigrade schools usually have few

teachers running the whole cycle of the school. It therefore means that there will be a reduction in the money budgeted as salaries of workers and such money could also be used for the execution of other projects for the development of the society.

The importance of economic commitment attached to the provision of education cannot be overstressed. Thus, no society's educational system can rise above the level of its economic strength; hence the strength of such a society's economy serves as a pivot in which the whole educational system revolves. Generally speaking, the cost of education is divided into two: social and private cost. Government expenditure on education is referred to as social cost. The private cost is the investment made on education which is made either by the students or parents (Salim, 1999). The private cost is divided into direct and indirect cost. The direct cost is the amount of money expended in the purchase of education goods and services. The indirect cost is the opportunity cost of the programme, which is what the family loses by sending children to schools (Olubor 2009).

Private cost is also divided into academic costs and incidental costs. Academic cost refers to the expenditure that is directly related to instruction, for example cost of application forms, registration expenses, school fees, text books, stationary, private lessons and excursions. Incidental cost consists of feeding, transport cost to school, cost of uniform including shoes and stockings, Parents Teachers Association donations, end of year party, development levy, games, caution and medical fees.

Cost of education is one of the major aspects that determine access and quality of education in every society. It is based on this assertion that UNESCO recommended a minimum of 25% of every nation's yearly allocation of budget to the education sector (Onyidoh 2009). In Nigeria, the task of funding the basic education rests on the shoulders of government. According to Universal Basic Education Commission Annual Report (2007), the federal government of Nigeria has made the basic education free and compulsory for all school-going age children. To implement this, Federal government shall continue to provide assistance to state and local governments in the provision of uniform and other materials that will make basic education qualitative all over the country.

It is imperative that all the state and local governments within the country key into the programme by providing free and compulsory basic education from primary to junior secondary schools to pupils and students respectively. This is to ensure that children have access to quality basic education without financial or other hindrances. It is therefore expected that the determination of governments at all levels to provide basic education to all Nigerian citizens will lead to high quality education in the country.

The complexity regarding the provision of basic education for citizens is not peculiar to Nigeria; it is an issue that cuts across many countries of the world. Bahasa (2008) observed that considering the challenge of provision of basic education to countries in the Middle East, most of the countries within the regions had to map out various strategies in the provision and improvement of the quality basic education in their areas. One of such strategies was to organise a regional symposium in which policy makers, researchers, development partners and other stakeholders were invited for discussion on setting priority

policies in the areas of provision and improvement in the quality of basic education.

The general consensus was that attention should be given to budget allocation, curriculum innovation, private partnership initiative as well as collaboration with non-governmental agencies for the financial and technical support to basic education. This is because of improving its quality and provision of access to the end users with little or no financial burden on the later. Although this initiative could appear laudable, it is equally true that due to the pressing economic needs of societies and scarce resources at hand as well as other challenges, it is therefore unavoidable for governments particularly of the developing nation, to strive as much as possible to provide basic education to the citizens.

It is against this backdrop that many countries of the world have adopted multigrade teaching as a measure of providing basic quality education to the citizens that would be cost effective and at the same time achieve the desired goals (Mulkeen & Hggins, 2009).

Teachers Preparation and Curriculum Implementation of Schools Programmes

The practical implementation of education programmes is prerogative of the classroom teacher who serves as the last person in the curriculum implementation processes. The Nigerian National Policy on Education reiterates that no educational system can rise above the level of the teacher as he/she is the pivot on which educational system hinge (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Sika (2015) corroborates the assertion as he maintains that the level of a nation's education cannot rise above the quality of teachers of that nation. A critical appraisal of the above view brings to bear the enormous functions the teacher significantly performs in perpetuating society's heritage as well as energising human resources for the purpose of ensuring a holistic development of a society.

It is against this foregoing that teachers' level of preparation in terms of their knowledge about the programme as well as ability to implement it in the class needs not be taken for granted. This assertion is based on the premises that there is no distinction between successful implementation of school curriculum and teachers' preparation as both are inseparable. The argument here is that, no matter how careful a course may be designed to address the yearning of the society, it is the teacher who is looked upon as having the responsibility of delivering the packaged learning experiences to the end user for the purpose of making them responsible and functional people, who would work towards meeting societal needs and aspirations.

Rutherford (2006) observed that a course can only be considered successfully implemented in practical terms if the generality of teachers involved in the process are prepared to make it work. Sarason (1990) maintains that despite large amounts of money spent on various programmes, several of such efforts fail due to lack of understanding of the roles of teachers in the implementation process. According to Jafery (2015), policy makers in most cases take teachers for granted as they are viewed simply as skilled technicians

who would dutifully implement a curriculum according to specifications as directed by authorities.

Based on these assertions, it could be discerned that the knowledge of a teacher on a school programme which serves as a basis for its functionality in a classroom situation is paramount to its successful implementation. Okebukola (2006) observed that among other things one of the hindrances of teachers in the curriculum implementation process is their lack of in-depth knowledge of the programme. In other words, teachers' ability to effectively implement a school programme is a function of his vast knowledge on such a programme. It is therefore imperative that teachers' good knowledge of school curriculum which serves as a foundation for its effective classroom application has to foremost be put into consideration even at the curriculum planning stage. Understanding of teacher's readiness in terms of his/her good knowledge of a programme will go a long way in enhancing its speedy and effective implementation with expected results measured by set objectives. Where is the evidence that teachers lack skills in multigrade teaching?

Jafery (2015) postulates that teachers are the major pillars in curriculum implementation process hence their knowledge, experiences and competences are central to any curriculum improvement effort. He further observed that it is even more necessary to give them adequate attention as major stakeholders in the process as the responsibility of introducing the curriculum in and outside the classroom falls mainly on them. To ensure a hitch-free curriculum implementation in the school system, the goals and objectives of the programme have to be made clear to teacher as well as specific roles in actualization of the expected outcomes.

It is equally important to note that adequate training has to be given to both pre-service and professional teachers to effectively broaden their knowledge on a programme as well as equipping them with necessary professional skills that are required for curriculum implementation. Generally speaking, teacher training is a continuous process as it serves as an avenue for the acquisition of new experiences for effective service delivery.

A twenty-first century teacher is therefore a teacher who is not just out to impart knowledge but rather to ensure that the learning experiences imparted go a long way in addressing specific problems confronting the learner specifically and the entire society in general. Consequently, he/she goes to class well equipped with indebt knowledge of the subject matter as well as pedagogy and materials that could facilitate teaching and learning.

One of the major materials he/she is armed with in a class is lesson plan which serves as a sign post directing him throughout the process of teaching. It should be noted that a lesson plan that is haphazardly written or fails to skilfully conform to professional practices in the teaching profession is a clear indication that the lesson has already failed before its presentation in the class. Based on the foregoing a twenty-first century teacher particularly that a school needs not to take the aspect of lesson planning for granted. Sequel to the above, some of the technical areas of planning lesson in class will be discussed below:

Stating of behavioural objectives. Behavioural objective is a vital and technical aspect of a lesson plan as it determines the success or otherwise of a lesson. Some of the key areas to note here include:

1. Lesson objectives in a class have to be specific and spelt out in clear terms. Specification here refers to clear terms void of ambiguity considering the fact that it is planned for target group of learners in a special learning environment. For instance, a lesson objective vaguely stated could lead to confusion even in the process of its presentation based on the fact that two or more classes are to be taught at the same time in the same space. Behavioural objectives stated clearly will present a mental picture to a teacher and direct as to whether the lesson could be achieved with a time frame. Putting it differently it could be deduced that accomplishment of a teacher set task in a lesson is to a large extent the function of specification and clarity of stated behavioural objectives. Clearly stated objectives give room for effective use of instructional material and application of teaching method. According to (Aju, 2022) the essence of ensuring that objectives are stated in a clear and specific term is for the purpose of smoothly conveying instructional intent to the learner and also it helps in lesson evaluation process.

2. Cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of the learner have to be put into consideration. In other words, the teacher has to ensure that at the end of the lesson the learner's retrieval ability as well as his/her emotions and manipulative skills are developed. Consequently, the learners so exposed to a particular unit of instruction should be able to recall certain fact, express their feelings and equally carry out specific tasks based on the instruction they received.

3. The objective so stated has to be measurable by the action words that are used to describe teachers' intent in regards to the terminal behaviour expected at the end of the lesson. This is because teachers' intents on a lesson are measured based on the changes in behaviours expressed by the learner at the end of the lesson.

4. Closely related to the above is that the stated objective is subject to evaluation at various stages of a lesson. The evaluations here could be diagnostic, formative or summative. Whatever may be the stage at which such an evaluation will be carried out; the guiding principle has to be stated in behavioural objectives as contained in the lesson plan.

A twenty-first century teacher so referred to here is one who is vast in technological development particularly as it relates to his profession. According to Torpev (2016) the world generally is becoming so complex and volatile especially as it is more or less a global village. The responsibility of a teacher is to accept this reality and embrace the basic components of technology that could be incorporated into his teaching activities so that the learners will be informed of the developments within and outside the country. Orakcli (2020) posits that there has been a paradigm shift from traditional methods of teaching and learning to high technological methods with the use of information and communication technology gadgets and tools.

Conclusion

It will be pertinent to mention here that the world generally is becoming more complex and only holistic strategies have to be employed in addressing global challenges. The complexities referred to in this instance include societal composition where population of people is not evenly distributed among

geographical settings as some areas are heavily populated while others are sparse. In certain areas social amenities are available while in some places they are either inadequate or in extreme cases not available at all. However irrespective of these challenges every member of a society has to acquire quality education that would enable them live peacefully and also contribute positively to the development of the society. Based on forgoing a teacher in the twenty-first century has to make use of much more instructional strategies which are embedded in information and communication technology to ensure that wherever he/she finds himself the right available facilities are used based on environmental indicators. This is a conscious effort to make teaching and learning easier and more practical.

Recommendations

1. Universal Basic Commission should continue to organize workshops and conferences for classroom basic school teachers to update their knowledge on use of teaching strategies.
2. Colleges of education all over the country should disseminate the advantages of instructional strategy to pre-service and professional teachers so that they would apply it appropriately with a view of rendering their services in schools.
3. Closely related to the above recommendation is that fresh colleges of education graduates who are employed to rural schools should expose the ideas and benefits of instructional strategy to school administrators.
4. Multigrade instructional strategies should be adequately taught and also its values be exposed to students at colleges of education and faculties of education in universities.
5. Basic school teachers should be trained on the use of modern instructional strategies that could enhance effective classroom activities in multigrade schools.

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