

THE POLITICS OF UNIVERSAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

BY

Mustapha Adam¹

Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, University of Ilorin, Ilorin

Email: adamibnmustapha80@gmail.com

Aloba Fatimah Musa²

Department of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, University of Ilorin,

Ilorin, Nigeria

Email: fattymoore0@gmail.com

&

Yusuf Suleiman³

Department of Educational Management and Counselling, Faculty of Education, Al-

Hikmah University, Kwara State, Nigeria

Email: yusufsuleiman@alhikmah.edu.ng

Abstract

Nigeria as a country has undergone various political structures and phases that have affected the tune of her educational advancement. Thus, education and politics are inseparable. The paper examined politics of universal education in Nigeria. It looked in to the concept of politics and assessed the historical development of universal primary education in Nigeria with the implementation strategies. Also, the concept of universal basic education was examined as well as the basic features, components, objectives and key issues in the compulsory free and universal basic education act in 2004. Management and implementation strategies of the scheme were equally examined consecutively. Also, the factors that hindered the successful implementation of the scheme were looked into. The paper concluded that ideology of the ruling political party influence the policies, plans, programmes and implementation strategies of the UBE scheme. It was suggested among others that: there is need for the amendment of the educational objectives in the constitution, the scheme should be devoid of undue politicization for proper implementation and that remuneration and other conditions of service have to be improved considerably to ensure commitment of personnel.

Keywords: Politics, Education, Universal primary education, Universal basic education

Introduction

It is truism that there cannot be an apolitical education, thus education and politics are inseparable. However, unnecessary politicization of education in Nigeria has done considerable damage to the system (Adekunle, 2019; Akintude, 2017). Schools were indiscriminately established to satisfy political godfathers. Nwadiani (2014) posited that educational goals, management, production process and accreditation system are metrically wedded to politics. This undue politicization has contributed to policy inconsistency, discontinuity and their attendant negative multipliers. It is therefore believed that there is need to strike balance between the politics of education and its beneficial effects on the socio-economic growth of Nigeria Education, regardless of the level, are both a social service and an investment in manpower.

It is an indispensable instrument for bringing about an educated, civilized and forward looking democratic society for providing manpower to implement the development programmes of any nation (Arop, Owan and Akan, 2018; Burchified and Synder, 2003; Jaiyeola and Aladegbola, 2016). However, if education is really accepted as an investment, no government, serious about its intention can allow any half-measure to be built into it (Aja, Egwu, Aja-Okorie, Ani and Amuta, 2018). Obayan (2002) observed that there can be no meaningful socio-economic and political development of any nation without the right type and appropriate quality of education. The idea of universal education is not a new system in Nigeria. Past civilian and military governments introduced the programme as part of the step towards eradicating illiteracy, combat poverty, develop consciousness for education and provide basic needs for all Nigerian children that are of school going age. On January 17, 1955, shortly before independence, the western regional government under the premiership of late Chief Obafemi Awolowo launched the free universal primary education in order to gain political sympathy from the electorates. Another instance of the scheme politicization was hurried launching of the programme by the eastern regional government under the premiership of Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe in 1957. It was also launched in 1976 by General Olusegun Obasanjo and re-launched in 1999 as Universal Basic Education for Nigerian citizens to reap the dividend of democracy.

Concept of Politics

Several definitions and ideas have been advanced by scholars and political scientists as to what politics is. Politics emanated from the Greek word “polis” meaning how the machinery is to be operated by those charged with the conduct of government (Amobi and Oraelosi, 2016; Oyelade, and Abolade, 2018). AbdulKareem (2001) remarked that politics is the system through which group of people come together to participate in the development of the generality of people in their areas. Price (2000) contended that politics is the study of the general principles on which government can be carried on successfully. Dyke (1999) viewed politics as a war without bloodshed. Lawton (2004) posited that politics is the way of resolving conflicting values which is inevitably arise when people pursue different goals or place different values on the goals. In the view of Allan (2000), politics connotes how human race behave when it has democracy. He posited further that, in a democratic setting conflicting opinions on the government acts as politics are ordinary worked out without getting into a civil war.

According to Odotola (2000), politics implies the activities that involve decision making as to who get what, when and how. Ojo (2000) coined politics as the authoritative allocation of scarce resources for a society. Politics is also concerned with the use and regulation of power and authority, especially in the allocation resources. Isefong (2009) and Rowley (2007) viewed politics as a war without blood shield, while Uchendu (2014) sees politics as how power is structured, pursued, captured, retained and lost. The mission of power is the right of the politicians that are empowered by the society to make public policy in accordance with the ideology of political parties. The key elements of politics are distribution of scarce resources and maintenance of social order.

Universal Primary Education Scheme in Nigeria

Universal education is an ambitious educational programmes aimed at eradicating ignorance and illiteracy as well as promoting and sustaining national consciousness and sustainability (Bello, Othman and Shariffuddin, 2017; Ogunwaye, 2002; Oladele, 2018; Osarenren-Osaghae and

Irabor, 2018). Universal primary education is the basic and fundamental education received by a person to enable such person to function as an effective member of the society (Taiwo, 2000). It also serves as a basis for further education. Nigeria was restructured politically into three regions by the Richards constitution in 1946, which marked the beginning of active tribal politics in Nigeria. In 1951, a governor, Sir John Macpherson, succeeded Richards with the intervening years of political parties National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon in the East, Northern People Congress in the North and Action Group in the west took firm root in each region with tribal affiliations. The Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani and Igbo were desirous of political independence from colonial rule. The greatest implication of regionalizing the country politically was that education became regional affair.

UBE Scheme in the Western Region

The Action Group led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, won the first election to the Western House of Assembly in 1952 and the party made it cleared to the members of the house that education would be given top priority. Fabunmi (2005) observed that the ideology of political party in power dictated the education policy of different regions. In July 1952, Chief S. O. Awokoya, the then western region Minister of Education presented a comprehensive proposal for the introduction of free, universal and compulsory education, otherwise known as Universal Primary Education (UPE) for the western region by January, 1955. Ogunsanwo (2014) noted that under the scheme, primary education was reorganized into six years programme, primary schools syllabus was officially published by government agency, teachers' training colleges were expanded and upgraded with the provision of modern facilities. As planned, the scheme was introduced on 17th January, 1955 without the word compulsory and the day was marked by parades and speech by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and S. O. Awokoya. This marked the beginning of educational revolution not only in the west, but in Nigeria as a whole.

Akinyemi (2007) noted that when the scheme was launched school fees were abolished and promotion became automatic. Expectedly, the scheme witnessed unprecedented increase in the enrolment of pupils. Taiwo (2004) observed that in 1954, before the introduction of the scheme, there were 456, 000 pupils in primary schools, but enrolment jumped to 908, 202 in 1956, a year after its commencement. As laudable as the scheme was, it appeared that the programme was used by the Action Group to gain political sympathy from the electorates and further propagate the party to the whole Nigerian populace. Ajayi (2000) affirmed that the education became politicalized in the then western region. However, inadequate planning, over politicalisation, shortage of teachers and facilities among others are parts of the challenges faced by the scheme. The regional government set up Banjo Commission to look into the problems and the commission recommended that all untrained teachers should be flushed out of the classrooms, teachers condition of service should be enhanced and compulsory registration of birth by local authorities. In 1963, Ajayi Commission was equally inaugurated to find out what accounted for the increased in school fees of private grammar schools and teachers training colleges in the western region. The commission recommended that there should be a reduction in school fees and concerted efforts must be put in place to improve teachers training colleges.

UBE Scheme in the Eastern Region

The challenges posed by the Action Group controlled government in the western region was too enormous to be ignored by the National Council for Nigerians and Cameroons (N. C .N. C.), the

political party that controlled governmental power and authority in the eastern region. The then eastern region minister of education, Mr. R. I. Uzoma had announced the regional government plan to introduce universal primary education in the region by 1956. However, in 1953, the region was characterized by political crisis which severely affected the proposed scheme. Changes took place and the new administration headed by Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe had to abandon the previously proposed scheme and in February 1957, the eastern region introduced its own U. P. E. Scheme. Due to the fact that that the region had no enough time to plan for the scheme, it ran into plethora of problems right from its inception. Intra party squabbles, inadequate finance, poor management and strong opposition of the catholic mission, which owned more than 60% of the schools in the Eastern region vehemently constituted parts of the obstacles that crippled the scheme in 1958 (Ajayi, 2009; Bolaji, Evans and Gray, 2019).

Consequently, a few months later its inception, the UPE programme in the eastern region was modified and the lower forms remained tuition free, while the upper forms became fees paying. This made the region in question to set up Dike committee in 1958 to review the educational system. The report of the commission was submitted in 1962 and recommended that, the eastern regional government should focus on qualitative education. By the time, Dike report was submitted, another committee known as Ikoku committee on the review of educational development in the east had been constituted. The committee recommended that government should have overhaul control on all primary schools, local schools board must be set up, duration of primary schools should be six instead of seven years and that teachers' condition of service should be comprehensive improved (Amobi and Oraelosi, 2016).

Northern Attempt

The Northern region was not able to enter the race fundamentally for financial reasons compounded by the enormity of numbers of children of school age resident in the region. Most leaders in the Northern Nigeria at that time were reticent regarding the blessings of western education as compared with Islamic system of education in the predominantly Muslim population region. Consequently, they thought that universal free primary education hardly crossed the minds of most leaders in the area (Taiwo, 2014). Additionally, the long term effect of indirect rule system of administration in the region gave the impression that some Northern region leaders thought that political power was more important than academic qualifications. Thus, the ideologies of Northern People Congress (NPC) the political party that originated from socio-cultural organization called "Jamma Mutani Arewa" were the general distrust of western education. However, the number of children enrolled in primary schools in the region rose from 66,000 in 1947 to 205,769 in 1957. The regional administration in the north started developing Primary Education Programme (P. E. P.) and Adult Literacy programme (A. L. P) in the rural areas instead of embarking on universal primary education. Borrowing a leaf from the west and east, the northern regional government invited Mr. H. Oldman in 1961 to find out the administrative and financial implications of introducing U. P. E. scheme. The recommendations on the reports made the northern regional government to start a system of public primary education in partnership with voluntary agencies in 1962 (Amobi and Oraelosi, 2016; Oyelade and Abolade, 2018).

The Federal Government Universal Primary Education Scheme of 1976

Another attempt at universal primary education was made in 1976, when the military government under the leadership of General Olusegun Obasanjo launched the scheme. It was principally aimed at maintaining a comparable educational standard throughout the country (Bello, 2015). The military government took immediate action to satisfy the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which had earlier advocated for Universal Primary Education in its Addis Ababa Conference in 1961. The project was regarded by then Federal Government Commissioner for Education, Colonel Ahmadu Ali as the greatest social scheme ever embarked upon by any African government.

The military government wanted to score a major political point by claiming victory for the scheme, instead of the then incoming administration to claim the glory for the scheme. This was another instance of the politicization of universal education by successive government in the country. Ajayi (2010) affirmed that the scheme was hurriedly launched without proper planning in 1976. It was projected that 2.3 Million children would be in primary one, but by the time the scheme took off over 3 million actually turned up. This hurried launching couple with the failure to precede the scheme by an evaluation study of the antecedents, also contributed to the failure of the UPE scheme. In fact, there was a paucity of everything except pupils (Lagun, 2015).

Universal Basic Education Scheme in Nigeria

It is in compliance with the Declaration of the World Conference of Education for All (WCEFA) which was made in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and stated in Article 1 that every child, youth and adult shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic needs. This declaration was reaffirmed at the world summit for children also held in 1990, which stated that all children should have access to basic education by the year 2000 (Yusuf and Ajere, 2003). In a bid to achieve education goals, the Dakar world education Forum was held as a follow-up meeting to the world conference on education for all by the year 2015. Universal Basic Education is an educational reform programme of the Nigerian Government that provides free, compulsory and continuous 9 years education in two levels: 6 years of primary and 3 years of junior secondary education for all school-aged children. It is an educational programme aimed at eradicating illiteracy, ignorance and poverty (Oyewole, 2000).

Obayan (2000) describes universal basic education as that level or form of learning that build firm roots for literacy and numeracy to inculcate and consolidate basic life skills of learning and how to learn it. The universal aspect of it implies the fact that education is something germane to all people globally. The basic aspect of the scheme implies that fundamental of education, that all others levels are built upon. The free aspect of the scheme refers to the need for every child to have access to education with respect to financial status. It is a policy reform measure of the Federal Government of Nigerian, that is in line with the state objectives of the 1999 constitution, section 2, sub-section 18 which states that government shall eradicate illiteracy and to this end, government shall as and when practicable provide a free, compulsory and universal primary education, free secondary education and free adult literacy programmed. This implies that the constitution does not guarantee free education by inserting the phrase “as and when practicable”. The governments made no meaningful commitment to the principle of free education, but rather hide under the phrase to take its decision. This gave the politicians the opportunity to use the constitutional provisions to their political benefits.

The scheme was launched on Thursday, 30th September 1999, by former president Olusegun Obasanjo at Shehu Kangiwa square in Sokoto State with the goal of providing free, universal and compulsory basic education for every Nigerian child aged 6-15 years. However, the programme was unable to take off immediately after its launched as it was not legally supported. Therefore, the initial UBE related activities were only implemented in the areas of social mobilization, infrastructural development and provision of instructional materials. The scheme took off effectively with the signing of the UBE Act in April 26th, 2004. In Nigerian, The name Universal Basic Education was suggested by prof. P.A.I Obayan and accepted by all Commissioners of Education throughout states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory” (Ipaye, 2000). The government assumed power on 29th May, 1999 and launched the UBE on 39th September, four months after coming into power. It appears the government again wanted to score a political point by hurriedly launched the scheme and one wonders the level of planning that was done by the government before launching the programme (Arikewuyo, 2002).

Basic Features of Universal Basic Education

The fundamental features of Universal Basic Education scheme as contained in the Federal Government guidelines on the implementation of UBE programme in 1999 are:

- i free formal basic education;
- ii compulsory, uninterrupted, Nine years of primary and junior secondary school education;
- iii emphasis on curriculum diversification and relevance to effectively cover individual needs and aspirations;
- iv disarticulation of junior secondary schools from senior secondary schools ;
- v introduction of rudiments of computer literacy;
- vi appropriate continuous teacher professional development; and
- vii community ownership of schools including participation in decision making process

Objectives of Universal Basic Education

The objectives of Universal Basic Education as spelt out in the proposal implementation blueprint by the Federal Government of Nigeria (1999) are as follows:

- i to develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion;
- ii to provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-gong age;
- iii to reduce drastically, dropouts rate from the formal school system through improved relevance and efficiency;
- iv to cater for dropouts and out of school children/adolescents through various forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education; and
- v to ensure the acquisition of the appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative and life skills as well as the ethnical, moral and civic values needed for laying the foundation for life-long learning.

Key Issues in the Compulsory, Free and Universal Basic Education Scheme

The fundamental issues in UBEC acts as contained in the official reference of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Gazette (2004) are that:

1. The Federal Government intervention shall provide assistance to the states and local government in Nigeria for the purpose of uniform and qualitative basic education throughout Nigeria.
2. Every government in Nigeria shall provide free, compulsory and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age.
3. Every parent shall ensure that his or her ward attends and complete primary and junior secondary school education.
4. The stakeholders in education in the Local Government Area shall ensure that every parent or person who has the care and custody of a child performs the duty imposed on him or her under the universal basic education scheme.
5. Transition from primary to junior secondary school (JSS) should be automatic and basic education terminates at the Junior Secondary School level thus entrance examination may no longer be necessary.
6. The secondary school system should be restructured so as to ensure that the JSS component is disarticulated from the SSS as stipulated in the National Policy on Education.

Basic education management and administration in Nigeria is overseen by the Universal Basic Education Commission at the Federal level with a range of other institutions fundamentally charged with the responsibility for education in the country. At the state level, Local Education Authority (LGEAs') under the supervision of State Universal Basic Education Board charged with the responsibility of controlling the programme. Other institutions such as: National Commission for Normadic Education (NCNE), National Commission for mass Literacy, Adult and Non Formal Education (NMEC), National Teachers Institute (NTI) and Negerian Education Research Development Council (NERDC) among others. Thus, there is no clarity with respect to the management structure and guidelines for the scheme delivery. Ibrahim (2015) remarked that Nigeria does not possess the required implementation capacity to effectively implement the UBE programme due to overlapping functions of bureaucratic agencies.

Factors that Hinder the Successful Implementation of Universal Basic Education

Universal unanticipated variables emerged in the early stage of the implementation. Notable among these variables are:

- i Political Constraints: The incessant interruption in the country's political arrangement with its accompanying change of ministries has ever resulted in haphazard implementation or outright discarding of Nigerian educational programme. These deliberate actions have not been in its values but due to selfish and ethnic consideration. Atiku (2000) agree that the UBE scheme suffered from lack of sustainable political will.
- ii Inadequate Textbooks and Instructional Material: Arikewuyo (2000) observed that teachers cannot perform any meaningful work without adequate physical facilities in terms of instructional material and other infrastructure. Unfortunately, the state of physical and instructional resources in Nigerian schools is appalling. Nwagu (1997) affirmed that teachers' productivity could be severely affected due to appalling state of instructional materials. This would definitely hamper pupils' academic performance.
- iii Constitutional Provision Problem: Section 18, sub section 3a-b of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria state inter alia: Government shall strive to eradicate literacy and to this end, Government shall as and when practicable, provide Free, compulsory and universal.

- a. Free, compulsory and universal primary education.
- b. Free secondary education
- c. Free adult literacy programme

From this provision, compulsory and universal education has not been guaranteed by the constitution. The statement “as end when practically” is not only vague, it is also ambiguous at primary and secondary levels (Arikewuyo, 1999).

- iv Teachers’ Motivation: Ajayi (2004) posited that primary and secondary school teachers in Nigerian are not only dissatisfied with the teaching profession, they also have poor job attitude. Nigerian teachers see teaching as a job that has no professional pride or any recognition from the public. The government is not even helping the matter as it has always treated teachers’ welfare with levity and disdain.
- v Poor funding of the Educational Sector: This is a delicate area that has always generated debate in Nigeria. The UBE programme is a capital intensive one which requires a large budget surplus in procuring the need school plants and facilities for its effective implementation. The policy stated that the Universal Basic Education should be free. It is however, true that the financial burden on government often forces parents to get involved in funding thus basic level of education.

Conclusion

The Universal Basic Education programme is an expression of the strong desire of government to reinforce participatory democracy by raising the level of awareness and general education of the entire citizenry. UBE principally centered on the realization of access to qualitative basic and compulsory education as a foundation stone for the sustainable socio-economic development of the country and the continent at large. However, government is not unmindful of the magnitude of the problems inherent in a gigantic programme of this nature. Thus, the entire Nigerian populace should patriotically assume ownership of the programme as no sacrifice will be considered too great in ensuring its sustainability and success. Education for all is the business for all.

Suggestions

In light of the foregoing discussion, the following suggestions were made:

1. The scheme should be devoid of undue politicization for proper implementation.
2. Synergy should be developed by the government and relevant stakeholders in the UBE scheme to ensure adequate provision of instructional resources for effective service delivery.
3. There is need for the amendment of the educational objectives in the constitution to remove the ambiguous and vague nature regarding the compulsory and universal education. Teachers’ remuneration and other conditions of service have to be improved considerably to enhance their level of job satisfaction and commitment to the scheme.
4. Each level of government should strengthen its revenue base to avoid paucity of financial resource for the scheme which hitherto hinders the effective implementation of the scheme.

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