

Reflection on the Chasm Between Theory and Practice in The Nigerian Educational System: The Way Forward

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Abstract

This study examined the gap between theory and practice in the Nigerian educational system. It employed a descriptive approach that comprises dialectic analysis, logical discussions and conclusion as tools. Concepts and issues such as education, theory, practice, the relationship between theory and practice, assessment of the gap between theory and practice of education in Nigeria and causes of poor implementation of educational policies were fully discussed. Based on the assessment, it is obvious that a big gap exists between the theory and practice of education in Nigeria. The paper also revealed that though Nigeria has expressed commitment to education, the said commitment or theories seem not to be enjoying practical implementation; what is practically obtainable in the education sector is radically different and not in tandem with the policy document. The resultant effect of this misapplication of educational policies has led to massive degeneration in the education sector in terms of quality of the product of education. Based on the findings of the study, the authors suggested the way forward through which if adopted by the stakeholders, education sector will be rejuvenated and repositioned for effective delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the major instrument for social change. It is the life-wire of any society, irrespective of people, time and place. It functions as the vision and eye of a given society. It is quite essential to the advancement of any society because it can be used to effect changes in the society, social anomalies can be corrected via education in schools. Hence, any nation aspiring to attain a comparative height economically, technologically, scientifically, socially and otherwise will not take for granted the education of her citizens (Mgbomo & Elechi, 2021).

In short, education is being looked upon by many as a panacea to our numerous problems. It is so important that even the most backward nations or communities continue to

invest heavily in the educational system in anticipation of the positive and developmental outcomes. The increased awareness of the importance of education to development has awakened in people and nations a conscious effort at devoting resources to acquiring quality education. In recognition of this truism, various nations like Nigeria have made effort in one way or the other to improve the quality of education in the country.

In the past years, Nigeria has made great commitments to education as government after government keep coming up with new policies to reform, restructure and reposition the education system or sector. One disturbing question at this juncture is, whether these eloquent policies have been translated into practice, in other words, does the practice of education in Nigeria reflect the image of the stated policies and goals the education sector ought to achieve? A cursory look at the extent to which these policies have achieved their desired goals reveals that the policies are more utopian or theoretical than practical. The policies in practice are inconsistent and convoluted in many fundamental respects: and has phenomenally widened the gap between theory and practice, rather than actually, systematically bridging it.

In this paper, it is our contention that in order to correct this anomaly, we must, as a priority focus attention on bridging the gap between theory and practice in education provisioning, in particular in policy formulation and implementation. We strongly believe that it is only when the gap is bridged that the skewed situations in Nigeria - socio-political, economic or religious would begin to receive the needed elixir to cure and remedy the ailing situations in the country.

We now turn to our discourse. We shall begin our discourse with the clarifications of the concepts of education, theory and practice. Thereafter, we shall try to examine the tie between theory and practice, then the gap between theories and practice in the Nigerian educational system; after this, we shall discuss the causes of poor implementation of educational policies in the Nigerian educational system, then the recommendations and conclusion.

Education

The world is made up of many different kinds of people who differ from the ways they interpret this world. People have differences from the ways they view this world, they also have differences from how they view education. The word education came from two Latin words and they are: “educere”, to lead towards light and “educare”, to nurture, to bring up, or nourish (Isichei & Olufowobi, 2012). Literally, therefore, education is the process of nurturing or bringing up the young or the learner. It involves leading someone from the realm of darkness towards illumination or light (Mgbomo & Elechi, 2021).

Apart from this etymological definition of education, various scholars have offered their own definitions. for instance, Fafunwa (1980) defines education as the aggregate of a processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior, which have positive value to the society in which he lives. Nduka (1975) argues that education is the process of cultural transmission and using culture to embrace the people’s art, music, literature, philosophy, religion, commerce, political organization, science and technology. Also, Ogbebor (1992) views education as a means of preserving the way of life in which the person

believes. In a similar view, Okeem (2000) sees education as a process whereby the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behavior acquired for the overall development of man are to the general good of the society.

Contributing his view, Peters (1966) argues that if something is to count as education, what is learnt must be regarded as worthwhile just as the manner in which it is learnt must be morally unobjectionable; for not all learning is educational in relation to the content of what is learnt. Scrutinizing the above definitions provided here, we are able to see that all the definitions point to and emphasize the transmission of worthwhile skills, attitudes, knowledge and behavior that are needed to develop the young adults and make them useful to their selves and to the society in general (Nsirim & Mgbomo, 2021).

Theory

A theory can be understood as an idea or a body of ideas or principles put forward for the purpose of explaining phenomena in a rational manner. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary (2017), a theory is a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. It is a set of assumptions, propositions or accepted facts that attempt to provide a plausible or rational explanation of phenomena. Also, a theory provides a road map for studying problems, developing appropriate interventions, and evaluating their successes. It presents a systematic way of understanding events or situations by illustrating the relationships between variables. Theory means a set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based e.g. theory of education. It is a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained e.g. Darwin's theory of evolution. Hamilton (2017) explains that most theories accepted by scientists have been repeatedly tested by experiments and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena.

Practice

In a simple, common place understanding, practice means doing, performing, acting, really engaging in concrete situation, not only once, but as often as required, so as to attain the desired perfection, with regard to the objective of whatever it is that is being done while in a more formal understanding, practice is the act of repeating a behavior over and over, or engaging in an activity again and again, for the purpose of improving or mastering it, as in the phrase practice makes perfect (Wales, 2014). Wales goes further to explain that practice is used to describe what really happens as opposed to what you think will happen in a particular situation.

Theory and Practice

Theory and practice operate like soft and hardware in computer. Software gives life to hardware while hardware displays the life to the real world. This principle applies to theory and practice. Therefore, theory and practice cannot be treated in isolation. This is because in education we use theory to investigate answers to the questions of why, what, and how education problems should be addressed and the only means through which we can arrive at these answers is by putting

things into practice. This means that, practice is an application or a realization of a theory. Just like empty coffee cups, theories have shapes and boundaries, but nothing inside. They become useful when filled with practical topics, goals, and problems. Theory is a proposition, which when tested repeatedly and proven, transforms into theory. Practice is an application or realization of a theory. The relationship between theory and practice in education rests on a profound creative tension. As we become more theory based in the application of experiential education, it is essential to maintain the delicate balance between theory and practice. Theory informs practice, while practice tests and refines theory (Mgbomo, 2022).

Theory and practice put together is like a torch and battery. Without the battery, the torch is lifeless and without torch, the battery is worthless. Theory and practice provides general clarifications to events with the purpose of clarifying and making sense out of what seemed to be confusing. For instance, why are things not known by our ancestors known today? This is explained by the process of learning from practice to theory, and from theory back to practice. Thus, theory is accepted and useful only when it works in actual practice. For instance, Albert Einstein (1879-1955), theory of relativity is known to the world because it was demonstrated and it works in actual practice. Similarly, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), evolutionary theory was accepted because the theory was of major influence on the life and earth sciences and on modern thought in general. Equally, most ethical theories particularly those of David Hume (1711-1776), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) were known because practically, they were used to redirect moral education. The simple philosophy behind the bankable explanations is that theory can only be accepted and useful when it is demonstrated or applied in a particular thing and it works (Mgbomo, 2022). Some of the major relationships between theory and practice as identified by Umar (2018:63) include the following:

- i. Both theory and practice are tools used for educational delivery
- ii. They all teach the good conduct of teaching and learning
- iii. They all explain how education activities should be carried out
- iv. They are both source of good teaching and learning
- v. They are also used in matters of education
- vi. They also formed a source of different education disciplines
- vii. They both derived their aspiration from educational process
- viii. They all aim at achieving effective learning and teaching

Assessment of Theories and Practice in Contemporary Nigerian Education System

For decades, Nigeria has expressed commitment to education, with a belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance through functional education will form a basis for accelerated national development. Due to its commitment to education, the National Policy on Education (2013) maintains that education is meant to be compulsory, free, universal and qualitative. It further asserts that the goals of education are to:

- i. Provide the child with basic skills for entrepreneurship, wealth creation and educational advancement

- ii. Develop patriotic young people equipped to contribute to social development and in the development of their civic responsibilities.
- iii. Inculcate value and raise morally upright individuals capable of independent thinking and who appreciate dignity of labour
- iv. Inspire national consciousness and harmonious co-existence, irrespective of natural endowments, religion, colour, ethnic and social economic background
- v. Provide opportunities for the child to develop manipulative skills that will enable the child to function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capability

However, looking at the trend education is assuming in Nigeria, it is obvious that Nigeria has tilted her educational pattern to only theory and policy presentation and has continued to tie herself to the old and unimproved educational curriculum for decades. There are clear indications that programme implementation in education have been generally defective and largely ineffective and have shown disappointing outcomes. The goals that the educational sector was set out to achieve are yet to come to pass because the policies and theories exists only in paper with little or no attempt to implement it. Enacting laws without implementing them is as bad as not making the law at all.

The notion of universal education entails that education ought to be provided for all and sundry irrespective of natural endowments, religion, colour, ethnic and social economic background. This objective implies that everyone has equal right to education. Everybody should get what he/she deserves. However, a cursory look at what is happening in Nigeria today indicates that this is not attainable yet. As observed by Igbangi and Danladi (2018), the politics of Federal character and quota system are evolved as a standby approach at rationalizing and justifying injustices. In a nation where education ought to be provided for all and sundry, one wonders why there are differences in cut-off points for candidates seeking admission into the federal universities across the land. The result of the above action as noted by Nwachukwu (2014) is denial of access to education which is a blatant contradiction of the policy. Moreso, the classification of educational advantaged and disadvantaged regions is a clear sign of failure on the part of those charged with the responsibility of implementing the educational policies.

The idea of free education demands that education in the country ought to be provided and funded for all and sundry through taxation and charitable organizations. It is opposed to education funded through tuition fee paid by beneficiaries of education. This is one area that has remained unachievable as parents/guardians still need to take responsibility for provision of some amenities. In practice, there is no practical evidence to show that there is free access to education as stipulated by the National Policy on Education (NPE). Though, it must be noted that free education is no doubt demanding on the part of government but it is not an impossible task as there are countries with records of providing genuinely free education. Some countries have gone to the extent of providing free education up to higher education. For instance, Estonia as perceived by Jabaar (2020) started providing free higher education from 2013. He further noted that Denmark, Cuba, Czech Republic, Greece, Turkey and Argentina are countries that provide free education at all levels for their citizens. Regrettably, the level of commitment to funding of

basic education by the Nigerian government does not seem to be strong enough to guarantee free education. The best way to describe what obtains in Nigeria according to Jabaar (2020) is to call it subsidized education.

Furthermore, the idea of compulsory education has also been poorly implemented in Nigeria. Buckland (2000) professes that compulsory education refers to a period of education that required all people and it is imposed by the government depending on the country constitution. It can also be seen as the name given to the legally-required period of time that children are expected to attend school. It involves the duty imposed upon parents by law to see that their children receive quality education in schools (Abdulkareem, Sule & Yakubu, 2021). This type of education takes place mostly at government established schools. Education in Nigeria as outlined in the National Policy on Education ought to be compulsory especially between the ages of 6 and 15 in order to enable the children have a strong educational foundation that will allow them to succeed and be model citizens. A logical look at the extent to which this policy has achieved its desired goal shows that it is a far-fetched dream as little or no effort is made to ensure its implementation. How many parents/guardians in Nigeria have been persecuted for keeping children of school age out of school? Until erring parents are properly disciplined, children's right to education will continue to be trampled upon and the idea of compulsory education for Nigerian children will continue to remain on paper.

Quality education on the other hand is a dynamic concept. It evolves with time and is subject to economic and environmental conditions. Quality education according to Briggs and Desmond (2013) has to do with continuous improvement of inputs, processes and outputs required in delivering educational services, which covers student enrolment and retention, gender ratio, student teacher ratio, facilities, curriculum, assessment, training and development of students and teachers, improved result in external and internal examination, high moral standard, obedience to rules and regulation etc. Sadly, this is one area that has been ill-treated by the Nigerian government. The Nigerian education system is presently in serious crisis. The different levels of public schools suffer from poor conditions of learning, high students-teachers ratio, overcrowded classrooms, whereas the National Policy stipulates 35-40 students per teacher (NPE, 2004). These conditions have eroded the quality of education provided in public schools. Our institutions of learning and individuals have almost been milked out of existence. Instructional materials are too expensive to import or buy and the country cannot produce most of them locally. Our libraries are no more equipped with the latest and valuable literature. It is not surprising, then, that majority of the school graduates in Nigeria cannot read and write, let alone acquire manipulative and lifelong skills as well as moral values as outlined in the National Policy on Education (Igbangi & Danladi, 2018). This however, according to Jabaar (2020) does not account for millions of out of school children who for reasons of conflict, discrimination, disability, and other obstacles, are not enrolled in school. The above might be one of the reasons why majority of the rich enrolls their children in private schools where relatively higher level of quality can be gotten while the poor and vulnerable that are in the majority have no option than to enroll their children in the public schools.

Aside from literacy, education ought to provide opportunities for the child to develop manipulative skills that will enable the child to function effectively in the society. Education according to Peters (1966) and in the National Policy on Education is not just about knowledge and skill, it is also about values. It is expected to develop patriotic young people equipped to contribute to social development. It is also expected to inculcate value and raise morally upright individuals capable of independent thinking, and who appreciate dignity of labour. Education is also supposed to inspire national consciousness in the young in order to promote harmonious co-existence among Nigerians. Disappointingly, like other policies, these educational objectives and goals continue to exist only in paper with little or no attempt to achieve it.

It is glaring from the above analyses that even though the nation's education sector has received a lot of theoretical input, yet those policies have remained on the pages of papers. In other words, what is being practiced is totally a contradiction to what is contained in the policy document on education. As Okoroma (2006), rightly puts it: if there is anything in which we have become experts in this country, it is our propensity to propound theories and policies and bungle its implementation.

Causes of Poor Implementation/Practice of Educational Theories in Nigeria

It has been observed from the above analysis that despite the lofty and painstaking educational theories usually formulated in Nigeria, little or no tangible outcomes have been achieved as they always tend to fall by the wayside. The problems of policy implementation in Nigeria generally are structural, environmental and attitudinal. Some of the major factors responsible for the failure of policy implementation in Nigeria as highlighted by Iornumbe (2018) and Igbangi and Danladi (2018) include:

- i. **Over Ambitious and Unrealizable Policy Goals:** Many policies advanced by government tend to be over ambitious and unrealizable which largely affect how policy goals are decided. For instance, due to the fact that the "school feeding programme" introduced by President Buhari's administration is over ambitious and seems to unrealistic, it is already dead at the arrival.
- ii. **Corruption:** Corruption affects the content and quality of policy at formulation stage. Public office holders often make educational policies based on their selfish interest and sometimes only to attract public attention. Most educational policy goals in Nigeria are advanced based on the personal rewards and interests of the political leaders and their godfathers rather than for the development of the nation.
- iii. **Lack of Appropriate Technology for Implementation:** Implementing agencies in most cases lack appropriate modern technology, managerial skill and administrative capacity that are prerequisite for effective implementation of educational theories. The nation's research institutes are actually suffering from paucity of modern research materials.

- iv. **Lack of Continuity:** This involves a break, gap or interruption in the implementation of policies advocated by government. Lack of continuity arises primarily from change of government which in turn gives way to the abandonment of policies advanced by previous government as the incumbent government will also want to advance policies that will favour her government. Each regime usually comes with its own policy, thereby throwing overboard the policy of their predecessors-in-office. Lack of continuity in Nigeria has adversely affected policy implementation. This style of leadership has actually affected the practice of educational theories in Nigeria. This may explain one of the reasons why many policies promulgated are not properly implemented all over Nigeria.

- v. **Poor funding:** The financing of education is at the heart of the educational crisis in Nigeria. There appears to be a perennial crisis of funding and lack of definite structures and strategies in funding of education. Nigeria's budgetary allocation is always less than the 26 percent recommended by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This has led to not just failures but decay in the educational sector of the country. In fact, in the 2017 budget proposals presented by President Muhammadu Buhari, N448.01 billion was allocated to education, representing about 6 percent of the N7.30 trillion budget, contrary to the recommendation by UNESCO (Premium Times, March 2, 2017.)

The Way Forward

- i. Education policy formulation should endeavour to show more concreteness in policy formulation by making less haste in rolling out policies. Through pilot studies, the resources (human/technical and material) monitoring and evaluation could be worked out; thus arming themselves with accurate database.

- ii. The culture of discontinuity of policies should be discouraged. The national and state assemblies should enact laws that will guarantee continuity of policies made to enhance growth and development. The culture of changing or discontinuing a policy once there is a change in government should be discouraged, even though government comes and goes, administration is continuous. There should be continuity in policy except if the policy is found not to be useful to the people.

- iii. Existing policies should be reviewed continually with the aim of removing obsolete or non-functional ones and strengthening the functional ones so that they can have more impact on the people

- iv. There is need for government and policy formulators to fully understand that best formulated education policies without adequate financial resources for implementation is likely to fail. The question of funding therefore remains a serious and urgent one in policy implementation. Government should have the political will to determine how

education in Nigeria should be funded. Severe budgetary constraints, as experienced in the funding of education in Nigeria, have led to a “snail-pace” policy implementation

- v. There should be provision for adequate monitoring of projects, to stop the problem of abandoned projects and to ensure the realization of policy goals.

CONCLUSION

In this enterprise we have tried to show that there exists a yawning gap in the theory and practice of education in Nigeria today. The paper re-affirms the existence of gap between theory and practice in Nigerian education and the need to bridge the gap. The gap is sequel to the inability of the country to achieve her set goals through the present educational system. The gap exists due to poor implementation and systematic shortcomings of not putting theory into practice. For instance, the free, compulsory, etc. programme has failed to achieve much not solely because of lack of human and material resources but largely due to poor implementation or in other words, not putting theory into actual practice. Though, it must be noted that some of the roadmaps or theories are quite appropriate in addressing the needs of the nation. This directs to fact that more needs to be done to ensure the implementation of policies. Thus, government and other stake holders should be encouraged and supported to bring to fruition the intended purpose of the policies. If this is done, we will be able to bridge the chasm that exists between theories and practice in the education sector.

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