



CREATING A SPACE WITHIN THE BASIC EDUCATION FRAMEWORK FOR ALTERNATE LEARNING SYSTEMS FOR UNIVERSALIZING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the need to universalize access to quality basic education to all children of school age against the current deficiencies and weaknesses of the existing structures of the formal primary schools. The formal school system, the paper noted, is inadequate, inaccessible, and unaffordable to a growing number of school-age children whose parents are poor or live in rural areas. In addition, these children come to school with some background factors which are often incongruous with the ethos of the formal school system, and which therefore place them at a competitive disadvantage with other learners. Using the framework of the ‘expanded vision’ of basic education as contained in the Jomtien Declaration, the Dakar Framework of Action and Nigeria’s Universal Basic Education (UBE) program, this paper attempts to highlight the roles that alternative traditional school systems, such as the Quranic schools, can play in meeting the learning needs of these marginalized children.

Keywords: Universal basic education, Quranic schools, alternative education.

INTRODUCTION

There are three developments with regards to demand for education at the basic level which compel another look at primary schools as the main agents for the delivery of education. First, there are large numbers of school-age children who are out of school despite years of investment in this regard. As of the 2015/16 session, there were 10.7 million children aged 6-11 out of school (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). Secondly among those enrolled, some drop out before completing the full cycle of schooling or are unable to transit to the next level of schooling (Junior Secondary School, JSS, in Nigeria) after completion. While the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) reported a primary dropout rate of 1.52%, 16.23% of completers of primary schools were unable to transit to JSS (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2018). Thirdly those who complete the full cycle of schooling end up having low learning outcomes mainly due to the poor state of infrastructure,



personnel, and other learning resources in their schools. These resource shortages are documented in the UBEC digest cited earlier. Public primary schools in Nigeria have problems of access, retention, and achievement; all of which cumulatively work to the advantage of the poor and rural populace.

In Nigeria, 81% of the public primary schools are in the rural areas (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2018), yet the percentage of children out of primary school in rural areas was 44% compared with 15% in urban areas as of (UNICEF, 2013). The percentage of children out of primary school in the poorest quintile was 77% compared to 6% among the richest quintiles. One possible cause of this variation is the cost of education. For the poor, these costs involve much more than the direct costs of schooling such as school fees, cost of uniform, feeding and books; they also include the hidden or opportunity costs of schooling. Because children may be involved in livelihood economic activities competing for their time, the hours spent by them at school involve some form of a loss to their families. The consequence of this is irregular attendance at school, drop-out or outright refusal to enrol. Children of the poor are also least likely to have the basic nutritional status necessary for effective learning (Carcillo et al., 2017): children often come to school hungry, tired, and lacking motivation for learning.

Even as the formal education system struggles with high demand and low efficiency, several non-formal schooling options exist that both complement and compete with it. Most of these options are provided for, recognized, and regulated by the state as part of an expanding private education sector that is active in the formal basic education sector. For instance, of the 79,763 primary schools (offering the full cycle of Primary Education including early childhood and pre-primary) in Nigeria as of 2018, more than half (46,933) or 59% are private (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2018). The distribution of private schools by geo-political zones shows that the South-West has the highest number at 18,445 (23%) while the Northwest and North-East trail the rest with 4,014 (5%) and 2,550 (3%) respectively. The import of these statistics concerning the Northwest and North-East will become clearer soon.

Schools also exist outside the scope of Nigeria's education that competes with and compromises its overall goals of providing universal access to education for all in line with the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The most worrying of these are privately owned schools of early religious education and training are commonly known as Quranic Schools that encroach into the enrolment base of formal basic education and restrict access to it for those it enrolls. Given that most of these schools do not integrate the core components of formal basic education into their curricula (English, Mathematics, Social Studies, & Science), the students they enrol are technically considered as out of school (The World Bank, 2017). There are no reliable statistics to date of the number of these schools or the students they enrol. But official estimates of the number of Quranic school children out of school (Almajirai) run into millions making them be among the largest category of out of school children in Nigeria, probably second only to girls. Given that Quranic schools are more prevalent in the North-East and North-West which are also the zones with the highest number of OOSC, this assertion is hardly surprising.

The challenge before the country now is how to ensure that the children that Quranic schools enrol are included in basic education. For several decades now, the country has been experimenting with various models of integrated curricula for Quranic schools that aim to provide the integrated teaching of the core components of formal basic education alongside the religious content that they teach. The design of these programmes is non-formal which involves the use of several policy instruments, curriculum materials, and the participation of state and non-state actors. The latest policy direction of the FGN is to institute an alternate education programme that aims to provide a parallel track outside of the formal school system to provide differentiated education programmes and provisions tailored to the uniqueness of the different categories of OOSC.

Making a specific reference to one category of OOSC in Nigeria, the Almajirai, this paper analyses the existing framework of the UBE programme in Nigeria to determine how adequately prepared it is



to provide for the flexible inclusion of the alternative education programmes as optional tracks to basic education. This is part of a larger study that analyses integrated curricula targeting Quranic schools in three states in Northern Nigeria (Katsina, Sokoto, & Zamfara) from the perspectives of its end-users and practitioners.

The study interrogates the assumption that the integrated curriculum approach in Islamic education is highly contested. It reflects doctrinal schisms that are discernible at the level of classroom and pedagogy even when the debates from which they originate are framed in theological terms. The study, therefore, argues that an investigation into the integrated curriculum within the context of Quranic schools must discern the ideological and doctrinal undertones (and implications) implicit in everyday curriculum realities and determine their place within the larger framework of the struggle for knowledge control. The component of the study that this article reports on focuses on the analysis of existing policy frameworks that surround the development and implementation of integrated curriculum for Quranic schools.

Specifically, it asks; what are those aspects of the structure or internal mechanisms of the formal primary schools that work to the disadvantage of the poor and the rurally located, and lead to educational inequality? How do traditional/non-formal approaches fit into the framework of Universal Basic Education? How can they be made to work for the poor and the rural populace? These are the issues raised in this paper, and they are discussed regarding the Qur'anic School System of Northern Nigeria.

METHOD

The methodology used for this component of the research is document review and analysis. The first phase of this exercise was an online search of the relevant policy documents relating to basic education in Nigeria. Some of these documents such as the NPE, UBE Act, NFE policy guidelines are so well known and readily available online. But in addition, the research team also reached out to relevant MDAs in the management of basic, non-formal, and Islamic education (mainly SUBEB, SAME, & AIEB) in Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara states. The research team interacted with the relevant government officials in these MDAs as the first group of respondents. The aim was to obtain the relevant background information on the status of integration of Quranic schools in the state, ongoing programmes, their implementers, curriculum materials used, and their contacts. The documents obtained through this exercise were numerous, but this analysis focused on the three policy documents earlier mentioned, commentaries about them, and periodic guidance received from NMEC on the NFE sector.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The formal school system and its limits

Nigeria's NPE considers basic education to be the education given to children from birth to 15 years of age and it consists of Early Child Care and Development Education, ECCDE (0 - 4 years) and 10 years of formal basic schooling. The 10 years of formal schooling is segmented into one year of pre-primary schooling (4-5 years), 6 years of primary education, and 3 of Junior Secondary School (JSS). While recognised as forming part of the basic education, the ECCDE component is not considered as part of the 10-year free and compulsory basic education that the state is obligated to provide for each Nigerian child. ECCDE is left with private providers and social development services (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The decision to include one year of pre-primary education came after the UBE Act which had considered basic education to be ECCDE and 9 years of formal schooling (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).



The Act also defines Universal Basic Education (UBE) to include basic education (as conceptualized above) and the other forms of education that are presumably non-formal. This according to the Act includes “adult literacy and non-formal education, skills acquisition programmes and the education of special groups such as nomads and migrants, girl child and women, Almajirai, street children and disabled groups” (FRN, 2004, Section 15 i). The basic education and UBE dichotomy introduced by the policy documents may appear trite, but it is telling of the skewed priority of government towards formal schooling. It permits the two sub-structures (especially the favoured structure) to form an identity, probably unwittingly, through a process defined as self-categorisation or identification.

Self-categorisation enables the formation of identity when the self takes itself as an object and can categorise, classify, or name itself in particular ways that distinguish it from other social categories or formations (Stets & Burke, 2000). A social identity is an individual’s (or in this case, an institution’s) knowledge of belonging to a social category or group. A social category or group, on the other hand, is formed when individuals view themselves as belonging to the same social category or hold a social identity that is common to other individuals in the category or group.

That is why even in its broadest definition of a school, the UBE Act suggests a formal structure and excludes the possibility of structures outside that definition to be accommodated within that definition. According to the Act, school “means a primary or junior secondary school *but does not include a class for religious instruction, a trade Centre, a training -college or any other institution intended solely for the education of adults*” (FRN, 2004, Section 15 i, emphasis added). The same section of the Act went further to define a primary school as “a school, which provides a six-year basic course of full-time instruction suitable for pupils between the age of six years and twelve years”. Notice how the Act systematically excludes schools of religious instruction, trade centres, and learners over the age of 12 from consideration in its scoping of schooling under its consideration. Contrast this with the reality that a significant number of children are late starters in formal education or missed out completing primary schooling at the ‘right’ age due to dropout. For the latter category of learners, second chance schooling means that they may re-enrol when they are way beyond the official age of schooling.

The provisions of the UBE Act are out of sync with the contemporary reality and needs of basic education that has been acknowledged by the NPE. For instance, in some of its provisions, the NPE relaxes the age barrier when it anticipated that UBE shall respond to the needs of many young learners whose education was interrupted by providing them with complementary approaches to the acquisition of basic education (FRN, 2013). This flexibility was further reinforced in subsequent years following the implementation of the Better Education Service Delivery for All (BESDA) programme by the FGN from 2018 financed by a World Bank loan. The BESDA programme recognized that a school whether public, private, or religious could be recognized as a basic education institution so long as it taught the four core subjects of English, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science.

Within this framework, it is, then possible for schooling options that were excluded by the formalized approach of the UBE Act to serve as complementary to formal schools in attaining UBE goals in Nigeria. If they offered the core basic education subjects and enjoy state support, they may as well meet up to the standard set by the UBE Act to be considered as public schools. This is because the Act defined as public any school that “is assisted out of funds provided by the Federal or State Government or a local education authority or a local government or is maintained by a local education authority or a local government” (Section 15 i).

The UBE and alternate schooling: Coexistence and adaptation

The UBE program is conceived as a holistic approach to the problem of many children out of school, high dropout rate and declining quality of primary education in many countries, particularly sub-Saharan African countries. Consequently, the new vision of basic education has been widened in both its objectives and scope to cover areas that have traditionally been left out in the past drives to



universalize access to education. For instance, two of the objectives of the UBE program (Federal Ministry of Education, FME, 2000) fall within the purview of this concern:

1. To provide free, compulsory universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age.
2. Cater for dropouts and out-of-school children/adolescents through various forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education.

The components of the UBE program that would fall under these complementary approaches would include NFE provisions under the administrative control of the NMEC. The Commission lists these programmes to include a programme for the acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy, and life skills especially for adults; a special program for nomadic populations; out of school/non-formal program for out-of-school children/youths and school dropouts; and non-formal skills and apprenticeship training for adolescents and youths who have not had the benefit of formal schooling (NMEC, 2017). The NMEC has programme offerings for the identified learners in three categories: basic literacy, post-literacy, and continuing education.

The basic literacy component has diversified provisions tailored to the unique needs of different categories of learners as illustrated in Fig. 1. Over the years, the basic literacy components have diverse curricula developed independently by government agencies (notably NMEC), development partners (notably UNICEF, UNDP, & USAID), or jointly between the two parties (government agencies & the development partners).

In 1997, UNICEF assisted NMEC to develop NFE curricula targeting out-of-school boys; the girl-child and adolescent girls; and Quranic schools. The version of the NFE curriculum for Quranic Schools was first published in 1999, revised in 2003, and has metamorphosed into the Harmonized Curriculum for Integrated Quranic education in 2011. Within the same period, UNICEF/NMEC has developed accompanying primers and facilitators' guides for these curricula in English, Mathematics, Health Education, Basic Science, Social Studies & Civic Education, Business and Vocational Studies, & Life Skills Activities. In 2019, NMEC issued a Basic Literacy and Numeracy curriculum that serves as the official curriculum for use in NFE centres.

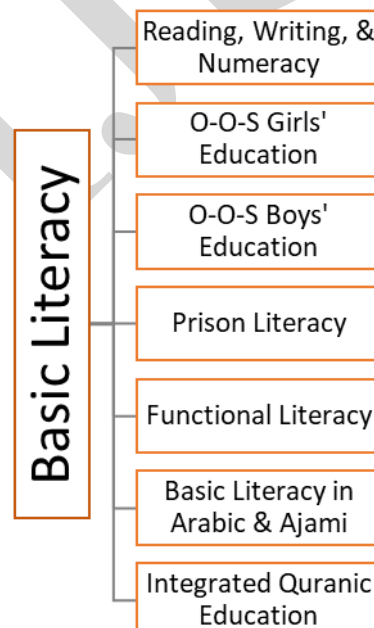


Figure 1. Basic Literacy and Numeracy curriculum that serves as the official curriculum for use in NFE centres



Results of the preliminary survey in Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara indicated that the official curricula designed for use in IQEs are hardly used. In their place, the IQEs use curricula and materials designed, implemented, and funded by International Donor Agencies and their partners. The projects that stood out as the most active in the IQE field in the three states were:

1. Reading and Numeracy Activity (RANA), funded by UKAID through UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the project aims to improve the quality of literacy and numeracy instruction for girls and boys in primary grades 1–3. Initially piloted in Katsina & Zamfara (2015-2018), now expanded to six states in Northern Nigeria as RANA light intervention in formal schools (in Kebbi & Niger) and HASKE, the non-formal IQE component (in Bauchi, Katsina, Sokoto, & Zamfara).
2. HASKE curriculum materials (which is a scale-up of the non-formal component of RANA).
3. Mu Karanta Reading Material. This was the main learning material for USAID/NIGERIA's Northern Education Initiative Plus (NEI+) a five-year project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project had the goal of strengthening the ability of the states of Bauchi and Sokoto to provide access to quality education—especially for girls, orphans, and children enrolled in non-formal learning centres and to improve children's reading skills (United States Agency for International Development, 2017).

Positioning Qur'anic school system as an alternate delivery system

The Federal Government of Nigeria has conceived an alternate school system that seeks to address the educational needs of out-of-school children in a flexible environment that considers their unique needs and circumstances. The FGN launched the alternate education programme in January and inaugurated a Technical Working Group (TWG) in April of 2021. The FGN inaugurated a high-powered National Steering Committee on ASP co-chaired by the Ministers of Humanitarian Affairs and Education on 26th January 2021. This initiative is to redress a disturbing pattern of children abandoning formal schools to engage in menial jobs in the markets, streets, and workshops. This situation, the Presidency added, is against the backdrop of the 13 million children reported to be out of school by some UNICEF sources.

The goal of the ASP is a holistic and comprehensive inclusive participation of vulnerable children in basic education through the initial provision of a limited scope of subjects in Mathematics, English language, Basic Science and Social studies. However, in subsequent years, the programme will provide relevant technical skills that will enable the beneficiaries to participate in gainful economic activities. A Technical Working Group (TWG) of 33 persons was inaugurated for the programme on April 13, 2021.

Alternate education as an education system provided within a formal or non-formal setting designed to address the needs of students/individuals who are underserved or at risk. Nigeria has had its fair share of underserved, marginalised, and at-risk children existing in such categories as Girl-Child, Almajirai, and Nomadic and worsen Nigeria's disturbing access indicators. With the existing security situation across many states especially in Northern Nigeria, the country must contend with an increasing number of displaced children whose education is interrupted.

The categories of children described above and many others who are marginalized and excluded from participation in formal education often possess characteristics that the formal school system does not recognise and is not prepared to accommodate. Many of these children are out of school due to social and economic exclusion and the absence of effective social safety nets that rob them of their childhood. The children must start earning income at an early age and, in some cases, support their families through their economic activities that leave them limited time for stable and prolonged participation that formal schooling requires. Those of them that are displaced due to security



concerns, social crises, or natural disasters, do not have the residential permanence that attending formal schooling would require.

Shortly before the declaration of the FGN on the alternate education programme, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) has, in conjunction with some international donors, developed an accelerated curriculum for use with different categories of OOSC. This includes Almajirai, the girl child, nomadic children, out of school boys, and other categories of marginalized children.

Accelerated Education is the process of moderating the time to promote access to certified education for children and adolescents who have missed out on substantial amounts of schooling. Accelerated Education is flexible and meant for over age learners (typically age 10 – 18) with curriculum, pedagogy and materials that are genuinely accelerated, and relevant language of instruction used. The learning environment is inclusive, safe, and ready for learning. However, for it to function as a legitimate, credible education option that results in learner certification, it must be aligned with the national education system (Accelerated Education Working Group, 2017).

The National Council on Education (NCE) at its 64th official session held on 6th November 2019, gave its approval to the draft ABEC for out of school children in Nigeria. Developed by NERDC with funding support from a European Union (EU) Consortium led by PLAN International, the curriculum is a condensed version of the 9-Year Basic Curriculum to be implemented in a 3-year cycle. The curriculum targets OOSC between the ages of 10 – 18 years whose education had been interrupted due to some of the reasons stated earlier. The flexibility of the curriculum addresses the unique needs of children who are forced to work, are over-age, are young mothers, or who face other forms of exclusion from entering or remaining in the formal education system.

The curriculum covers five subjects: English Language, Mathematics, Nigerian history and values, basic science technology, and one Nigerian language. It was officially handed over to the Hon. Minister of Education by the NERDC on 29th April 2021. At the presentation, the Executive Secretary of NERDC said the ABEC was designed to:

provide a catch-up educational programme suitable for the educational needs of OOSC and in the process mainstream them to formal school programme or provide them with alternative career path through enrolment into vocational training centres, after completing basic education (“FG, EU, Others Develop Education Curriculum for Out-of-School Children,” 2021).

Considering what has been achieved in the process of developing curricula and programmes customised to the unique needs of Quranic schools, especially by international NGOs, this shift in policy position by the government provides a means of rectifying the isolation of Quranic schools and other non-formal systems that had hitherto defined the UBE programme. This is because, despite its limitations, the Qur'anic school system is still a potent force in the development of education in many parts of northern Nigeria. There are certain features of this school system that make it attractive to those who are marginalized by state-sponsored schools, the poor and the rural populace. The attractions of this school system are based on the following features it possesses:

1. It is culturally and religiously relevant to the people. It provides Qur'anic literacy and training in Islamic etiquettes which are necessary for the development of an Islamic personality and continuity of Islamic traditions.
2. It is flexible to the rhythm of life of the poor and rural communities. Qur'anic schooling does not conflict with the economic function of children as school hours often take account of and make allowances for other engagements of the learners.
3. It is cheap. Qur'anic schooling does not entail many expenses; there are no tuition paid, no school uniforms, and no prescribed textbooks to be bought.



Unfortunately, these features of the Qur'anic schools that make it attractive also renders it unsuitable for the formalized structure of the state school system. It has also been part of the reason why previous attempts at reforming the system have either not been successful or have resulted in the development of other splinter school systems (Umar, 2001). Islamiyya schools; and Schools of Arabic and Islamic Studies are offshoots of failed attempts to the reform Qur'anic school system. The problem is that these past attempts have tended to gloss over the traditional mandates of the Qur'anic schools for which they are valued, and which ensures their continuity. Therefore, even though the Qur'anic School System has a lot of promise in its absorptive capacity for expanding access to basic education, there is still the fear that the attempt to improve the quality of their delivery may introduce elements that may make them too formal or too secular. Another concern is the provision of linkages between the formal school system and the Qur'anic schools in such a way that there is educational, social, and economic mobility for the recipients of alternative schooling.

Conclusion

The formal primary school has a very crucial role to play in the provision of basic education to all children of school age. However, many such children cannot be reached or served well by the existing structures of the formal primary schools. Non-Formal traditional structures like the Qur'anic schools are also in their current state not suitably disposed to the delivery of basic education, they need to be reformed. Reforming those means introducing some elements of the formal structures of primary education into their curricula. The challenge is how to do that without at the same time compromising their traditional mandates or their flexibility and cheapness which make them very attractive alternatives to people who are underserved by the formal school structures.

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