

The Impact of Covid-19 on Nigerian Education System

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Abstract: At a time when the Nigerian schools are on a temporary closure following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper looked inwards and reflected on the nature of the education system and revealed its myriads of problems. The COVID-19 pandemic indeed had a huge impact on the educational system in Nigeria. It brought about the cessation of all learning activities in Nigeria except for private universities and secondary schools that swiftly switched to virtual learning platforms. It also illuminated the digital divide between the Nigerian student and his counterparts in other climes. COVID-19 pandemic outbreak also offered an opportunity for the nation to realise the poor status of its educational system. Some of the major problems that have confronted the Nigerian education system, as revealed by this paper, include poor funding, inadequate and dilapidating infrastructure, inadequate teaching facilities, poor teachers' welfare, poor research funding, poor quality of teachers, unconducive learning environment, and the like. The study recommends for the exhibition of sufficient political will by the political leadership for the transformation of the education system as well as the sustained commitment of other stakeholders such as policymakers and educational administrators for the transformation of the system to give it its rightful place in our national life.

Keywords: Education, COVID-19, funding, government policy, research, and development, technological divide & Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever the thought of the Nigerian education system flickers on the mind, there is always a surge of ill feelings that inundates the mind owing to myriads of problems that have buffeted the sector for decades unmitigated. The realities of the Nigerian education system no doubt show that the leadership and policymakers of Nigeria have utter disregard for the UNESCO precepts that education is a human right for all throughout life and that access to education must be matched by quality. The quality of the Nigerian education system is despicable as the system is characterised by ills such as poor funding, inadequate and decaying educational infrastructures, insufficient teaching facilities, poor remuneration of teachers, ineffective policy framework, the politicisation of education, corruption, ineffective curriculum, lack of ICT facilities, scarcity and high cost of books, poor research funding, lack of quality teachers, poor teacher's welfare and the like. These anomalies have plunged the education system in Nigeria to a despicable low and have left so many Nigerian public universities at the bottom rung in the global ranking. This paper, therefore, sheds light on the Nigerian education system in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the closedown of Nigerian schools since February 28.

A CURSORY GLANCE AT THE NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM BEFORE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Education is a fundamental human right. It is also an essential factor in development. It is the primary means of human capital development. No nation can achieve sustainable economic growth and development without recourse to human capital development. It takes sustained substantial investment in the human capital for economic development to take root. Education offers numerous social benefits to the individual and the society at large. It improves the quality of human life in every society. It enhances peaceful coexistence by improving the understanding of individuals within a larger society. Education plays a very vital role in the life of every society as it secures the economic growth and social progress necessary for sustainable development. Effective education has the capacity to transform the life of a nation as it enhances creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and productivity necessary for economic growth and development. Education is very pivotal to national development; its very neglect is capable of derailing a nation from the path of development into an erratic array of confusion and stultification. History is fraught with many stunning innovations and technological advances owing to great transformations in the human mind stirred up by effective education. Education plays a very critical role in the life of any nation. It has a direct link with the process of nation-building, economic growth and development. The fact is a nation that fails to effectively

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and functionally educate its citizens consciously sows the seed of its very destruction.

The woes of the Nigerian education system are quite doleful. The myriads of problems that have perennially characterised the system show that the political leadership and other policymakers have undermined the place of education in our national life. Ekundayo described the educational system as “a mess from top to bottom” [1]. According to him, the 6-3-3-4 system of education which Nigeria has adopted since 1989 has worked effectively in countries such as China, Germany and China but the inability of policymakers to provide the system with proper funding support and effective policy implementation has left that Nigerian education system bereaved of its goals and objectives [1]. The Nigerian education system is in a pitiable state as it suffers pitiable neglect, infrastructural decay, poor conditions of service for teachers at all cadre, lack of effective capacity building for educators, lack of basic learning facilities and the like.

According to a UNICEF report presented at the Silverbird Cinema in Abuja on September 5, 2019, to mark the World Literacy Day, “Nigeria has the world highest number of out-of-school children. About 10.5 million Nigerian children aged 5-11 do not go school and only about 61% of 6-11-year-olds attend primary school regularly” [2]. The report further stated that half of the school-aged girls in some states in Northeast and Northwest Nigeria are not enrolled in school [2]. This disturbing revelation shows that Nigeria is the highest contributor to the global illiteracy index. In the 21st century, Nigeria still has about 60 million illiterate

citizens constituting over 30% of its population [3]. According to UNICEF, “too many Nigerian children and young people are being left behind, especially when it comes to education” [2]. These embarrassing revelations show lack of commitment and political will on the part of political leadership as well and education policymakers who have failed to articulate implement, effective and functional educational policies as well exhibit the right leadership for effective educational transformation across the country.

One of the major challenges besetting the Nigerian education system is poor funding by the federal and state governments. The education sector in Nigeria falls within the familiar territory of neglect in the Nigerian budgetary space. A mere glance on the Nigerian budgetary allocation Table 1 from 2009 to 2019 reveals the obvious.

The budgetary allocations to the education sector have for years remained below the UNESCO benchmark of 26%. The UNESCO sees education as an effective tool for peacebuilding, poverty eradication and achievement of sustainable development [5]. However, it is self-indicting that Nigeria, which is one of the signatories to the UN Sustainable Development Goals has failed to be compliant by not doing the needful to better its education system. The steady increase in the national budgets was never extended to the education sector. Poor funding has been the bane of the Nigerian education system leaving the system with inadequate and decaying infrastructures such as classroom blocks, laboratories, libraries and lack of modern learning facilities such as computers, projectors, interactive boards, e-libraries and other

Table 1: Federal Government Budgetary Allocation to Education (2009-2019) [4]

Year	Budget	Education Allocation	% of budget
2009	₦3.049 trn	₦221.19 bn	7.25
2010	₦5.160 trn	₦249.00 bn	4.83
2011	₦4.972 trn	₦306.3 bn	6.16
2012	₦4.877 trn	₦400.15 bn	8.20
2013	₦4.987 trn	₦426.53 bn	8.55
2014	₦4.962 trn	₦493 bn	9.94
2015	₦5.068 trn	₦392 bn	7.74
2016	₦6.061 trn	₦369.2 bn	6.10
2017	₦7.444 trn	₦550 bn	7.38
2018	₦8.612 trn	₦605.8 bn	7.04
2019	₦8.92 trn	₦620 bn	7.02

learning enhancement ICT facilities. The school teachers and tertiary education lecturers are poorly paid. Enough funds are not being provided for research and teachers training. The agitations of teachers for better pay have often disrupted academic sessions. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) which provides interventionist fund for infrastructural development and academic staff training and research assistant is limited in its capacity. TETFund itself was birthed in 2011 after prolonged agitation by Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU) for the revamping and overhaul of the public tertiary institutions. The body has a mandate of improving education tax revenue and making such available for its interventionist programme in tertiary institutions. Lack of proper funding of the education sector has led to poor quality of teachers and students. The standard of the Nigerian education system has been a steady decline. Many Nigerian students these days prefer to go to neighbouring countries such as Ghana and Benin Republic to study because they consider the education systems in such countries better than the Nigerian system.

Lack of educational infrastructures is another major depravity of the education system in Nigeria. The prolonged neglect of the education system has made it impossible for most schools to possess some basic infrastructures and facilities necessary for effective and efficient education. In the 21st century when the global classroom model has been significantly modified to include technological facilities such as advanced and ICT compliant laboratories, computers, projectors, internet, interactive whiteboards, virtual learning platforms and the like, it is quite regrettable that these facilities are lacking in most public schools from basic to tertiary level. These lacks leave the Nigerian student some decades behind their peers in other climes. When other nation's educational system is advancing speedily, the Nigerian system oscillates if not tilting backwards.

Poor teachers' welfare is another factor that has contributed to the eroding standard of education in Nigeria. Teachers in Nigerian primary, secondary and tertiary institutions are poorly paid and are not provided with welfare packages such basic allowances, housing loans, training grants and other incentives to motivate them and enhance their productivity and effectiveness. The incidents of corruption which have crept into the educational system such as examination malpractices, bribing of teachers for grades and the like can be traced to the long period of neglect and falling standard.

Poor educational policy implementation is another factor that has vitiated the Nigerian education. Taking on the Universal Basic Education Programme, for instance, it will be discovered that lack of political will on the part of the government and its agencies has made the programme unable to achieve its goals after over twenty years of its establishment. The UBE programme was launched in 1999 to ensure free, universal and compulsory 9-year education for every Nigerian child aged 6 to 15 years [6]. The UBE programme was intended at eradicating illiteracy, ignorance and poverty as well as stimulating accelerated development, political consciousness and national integration [6]. After over two decades of its establishment, the UBE programme has performed marginally. The was lack of political will on the part of some state governors, especially in northern Nigeria. The governors did not exhibit sufficient political will to ensure that millions of children are sent to school. They allowed the Koranic schools popularly known as 'almajirai' school to continue to thrive. Under the almajirai system children, mostly aged 6 to 14 are left under the tutelage of Islamic mallams without attending any form of formal education. This system continued to exist alongside the UBE programme with no policy measures to assimilate the almajiri into formal education. It was in the wake of COVID-19 spread that some northern governors perceived the dangers of the almajiri system. These children became vulnerable to the pandemic because they were street children. They lived on alms obtained in the streets for survival. Many of them were infected by the dreaded coronavirus. The realisation of the ills of the almajiri system made governors such as the Kaduna State Governor, Mallam El Rufai to outlaw the almajirai system. Before COVID-19 outbreak, the political leadership, as well as the UBE policymakers, did not make any serious move to stop the almajirai system.

The UNESCO in its assessment of the UBE programme stated that "although enrolment in primary and junior secondary schools have increased since 2011, transit from primary to junior secondary and completion rate remained below 70%" [5]. In many states of northern Nigeria, enrolment in primary education is still low in comparison with the primary school-age population. Also, across the bounds of states in Nigeria, especially in the north, there still exist some social, cultural and religious barriers that hinder female children from participating in basic education. Added to the above challenges of the UBE programme are the lack and dilapidated state of infrastructures such as classrooms, furniture, toilets, etc.

Poor quality of teachers is another characteristic of the Nigerian education system. There is presently no proactive measure to ensure the training and retraining of teachers for higher and effective productivity. The Latin saying, '*Nemo dat quod non habet*' (no one gives what they do not have) is a very factual saying that applies effectively to the Nigerian education system. The 21st-century teacher is supposed to be a sophisticated teacher that is abreast with current global practices in the profession. This ability makes the teacher able to keep the students abreast with current realities in the process of learning using ICT enhanced facilities. However, it is quite abhorrent that most teachers in primary and secondary schools are poorly skilled in the use of ICT facilities. Most schools and their teacher do not have the financial muscle to purchase and install ICT facilities for teaching and learning purposes. This reality has huge consequences for students taught in such schools and by such teachers—teacher's key roles in the achievement of educational objectives of individuals and the state at large. When the teacher is ill-equipped for this task, the overall objective of education will be truncated. The need for policymakers to ensure that teachers are well equipped for the education of young minds is in line with global realities and cannot be over-flogged. The position of Fafunwa that "no significant change in education can take place in any country unless its teaching staff is well trained and retrained" is incontestable [7]; likewise, that of Obayan that "no educational system can rise above the level of its teachers" is undisputedly veracious [6].

Another problem of the Nigerian education system is an unstable and ineffective curriculum. An effective curriculum furnishes educational administrators, teachers and students with a well-defined structure and measurable plan for delivering quality education. An effective curriculum provides a road map for the realisation of educational goals and objectives. An effective curriculum is a functional curriculum which serves the current educational needs of the state. Thus, for a country to have a clear cut plan for the realisation of its educational goals, it must have a well-defined curriculum that addresses its developmental challenges from the cradle. Presently, there seems to be no harmonised curriculum in the Nigerian education system, for instance, the public schools adopt that of the ministry of education while many private schools select for either or both from the Nigerian, American and British systems. This keeps the education sector in disarray with no common trajectory.

NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By January and early February 2020 when countries such as China and other European, American and Asian countries were battling with the nascent COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria appeared to be kept aloof from the Chinese disease. The reality of the disease was dawn on the country on February 27 when the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Nigeria. On March 23, 2020, when the total confirmed case was 40, with one death, two recoveries and 37 active cases, the Federal Government of Nigeria temporarily closed down all schools in Nigeria in a bid to contain the spread of the coronavirus [8].

Unlike other countries where governments came up with policies measures to fill in the gap created by school closure, Nigeria had no plan to keep the students engaged in academic activities. The ministry of education casually announced that pupils and student should tune to public media channels such as radio and television for learning programmes. There was no clear cut policy thrust to immediately tackle the disruption of academic activities to cater to over 45 million students affected by the closure of schools. Students were kept at home without any form of academic engagement. The private universities swiftly switched on to virtual learning platforms and carried on with learning activities while the public schools remained shut totally. The Nigerian education system was indeed hard hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. Second term examinations did not hold in primary and secondary schools, the second term was never started, and junior secondary school and senior secondary school certificate examinations, as well as university examinations, were suspended.

Covid-19 pandemic laid bare the wretchedness of the Nigerian education system. The system obviously lacked the capacity to migrate schools to virtual learning platforms. There was no unified data; schools were not linked up to any central information system or portal. Some rich and middle-income households were able to engage their children in remote learning activities via the internet, but so many households do not have the facilities and resources to engage their children in such. Also, many households are located in places with limited internet access and unreliable electric power supply, thus, making them leave their children in the dark when their counterparts in other climes were making progress.

So many countries in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and its attendant lockdowns were able to adopt effective measures to curb the effect of disruption of regular schooling. The Chinese government, for instance, provided computers for low-income households and offered mobile data and telecom subsidies as well to enable their children to participate in virtual learning [9]. In France, students who do not have access to computers were lent the devices they need. Portugal, on its part, partnered with postal services to deliver working sheet to a student who does not have access to the internet at home [9]. COVID-19 pandemic has clearly revealed that there is a digital divide between an average Nigerian child and his counterparts in most developing and developed worlds. The ministry of education was a handicap to play any interventionist role during the lockdown. The efforts of some state governor to adopt the use of local media channels such as were grossly ineffective as such programmes did not involve competent teachers and had no feedback mechanism.

Nigerian political leadership has failed to give education its rightful place. Since February 9, 2020, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has been on nationwide strike action in protest for non-implementation of its agreement with the Federal Government by the same government. ASUU's agreement with the Federal Government of Nigeria broadly borders on revamping and overhaul of the public universities, improvement of academic staff welfare and the imposition of the Integrated Personnel Payroll System (IPPIS) by the Federal Government. The sorry state of the Nigerian educational institutions which become more pronounced by the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have vindicated ASUU's clamour for better funding and overhaul of the education sector as government saw the loopholes in the education and health sectors. ASUU seems to be the only voice clamouring for the improvement of the universities in Nigeria. The political leadership of the country only make frantic efforts to call ASUU to negotiation table only when their strategic political interests are at stake. For instance, in 2019 following the long ASUU strike which was extending into the election period, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment quickly called ASUU to the negotiation table and promised them a fraction of their accumulated earned academic allowance owed them by the Federal Government. The strike was called off. The Nigerian crop of politicians is indeed bereft of nation-building ideals. They are always

over-focused on short term political goals with recourse to long term gains of the efficient and effective education system.

The Nigerian educational policy framework is another aspect of Nigerian education that needs to be squarely addressed. With the changes in technological advancement, labour market patterns, and general global environment, there ought to be functional policy responses to ensure that the Nigerian curricular are imbued with the resources and strategies that would align the Nigerian education system with global realities. The policymakers are the only stakeholders empowered to determine the pace and direction of the Nigerian education system. It is therefore pertinent for the policymakers to chart a new course that will move the system away from its current quagmire.

CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant cessation of learning activities in schools have provided an unprecedented opportunity for a deeper reflection on the Nigerian education. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the embarrassing loopholes in the Nigerian education sector as it did on the health sector. The education system in the decade has remained underfunded and is beset by myriads of problems such as inadequate and dilapidating infrastructure, inadequate teaching facilities, poor teachers' welfare, poor research funding, poor quality of teachers, unconducive learning environment and the like. Without sufficient political will to overhaul and transform the educational sector for greater effectiveness, the standard of education in Nigeria will keep falling, and this spells doom for our national life. There should be a concerted effort by all stakeholders to redeem the Nigerian education from tilting beyond the precipice.

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