

The Universal Basic Education as an Effective Strategy for Meeting the Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria.

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Abstract

The leaders of 189 countries of the world and their countries now face the challenges of achieving the Millennium Development Goals which they set for themselves during the Millennium Summit of September 2000. Although significant progress has been made by many countries towards the attainment of these goals, it has been noted that the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa are lagging behind. Nigeria, one of the countries of this region, has widened access to primary and junior secondary education with the hope of achieving some of the Millennium Development Goals. This paper addresses the roles of teacher education in the achievement of both the goals of universal basic education scheme in the country and some education related Millennium Development Goals and draws their implications for quality teacher education.

Key Words: Millennium Development Goals; teacher education; Nigeria; universal basic education; educational quality.

Introduction

In September 2000 189 world leaders met at the Millennium Summit and committed themselves and their countries to eight goals known as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at meeting the needs of the world's poorest people (UNDP, 2005). These goals resulted from deliberations on how to make significant, measurable improvements to people's lives, with the ultimate objective of reducing poverty throughout the world. The eight goals, which are to be met in partnership with the world's leading development institutions by the target date of 2015 are to: eradicate extreme hunger and poverty; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and, develop a global partnership for development. For each of these goals, the world leaders established yardsticks for measuring results, not just for the developing countries but also for the developed countries that assist in providing the funds for development programmes, and for the multilateral institutions that help countries implement them (UNDP, 2005).

The attainment of these goals has been a challenge to the nations of the world and significant progress has been recorded worldwide (United Nations, 2005). The progress

made has, however, not been uniform across the world, or with respect to specific goals. It has been observed that Sub-Saharan African countries are lagging well behind. These countries still have continuing food insecurity, rising extreme poverty, high child and maternal mortality and a large number of people are still living in slums.

The federal government of Nigeria faces the challenge of meeting the MDGs, and believes (rightly) that the attainment of the goals will be put in jeopardy as long as the human and material resources of the country remain untapped. One of the strategies adopted by the country in her multi-pronged approach towards attaining these goals and meeting the needs of people is the empowerment of people through education. Early and ambitious investment in basic education is also endorsed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for its capacity to foster gender equity and sustained economic growth. Investing in any form of education, however, can only have the intended impact if there are well trained and competent teachers. This paper addresses the role of quality teacher education in meeting some of the goals of the millennium development goals in Nigeria and the implications of this for quality teacher education in the country. It begins by highlighting the major objectives of the Universal Basic Education programme in the country and its relevance to the meeting of some of the MDGs, and the attendant demand for qualified and competent teachers in the country.

Universal Basic Education and the MDGs

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was launched in the country in 1999 and passed into law in 2004 as one of the strategies aimed at implementing the educational component of the MDGs. Before the commencement of the scheme, the Nigerian educational structure comprised six years of primary education, three of junior secondary, three of senior secondary and four of tertiary education. Primary education was free but not compulsory. Although universal primary education (UPE) was launched nationwide in 1976, even before the world leaders established it as one of the MDGs, limited success was achieved as attendance was not made compulsory for pupils of school-going age. With the passage of the UBE Act, all tiers of government in the country are mandated to provide free, compulsory nine-year universal basic education of

primary and junior secondary school age. Parents are required to ensure that they register for and complete the basic education cycle. There are sanctions for parents who do not comply. In addition to free tuition, the Act provides for free services in all public primary and junior secondary schools (Obong, 2006)

In order to ensure effective implementation of the UBE, the Act established the Universal Basic Education Commission, with prescribed functions, membership terms and structure. Universal Basic Education Boards (UBEBS) were also established at the State and Local Government levels. The Commission set for itself some short- and medium-term objectives with appropriate performance indicators. Some of the objectives include the widening of access to primary and junior secondary education, periodic review and effective implementation of the curriculum, improving gender equity, reducing the spread of HIV and mitigating the impact of AIDS as well as mobilizing and developing partnerships with international agencies, private and local communities (Obong, 2006).

A cursory glance at some of these objectives shows that they are targeted at achieving the basic components of the MDGs such as universal primary education, gender equality, combating HIV/AIDS, and developing global partnerships for development. The formation of the UBE was thus one of the approaches adopted by the Nigerian government to meet some of the MDGs and also fulfill its commitment to Education For All (EFA). In fact, the Act goes beyond the requirements for meeting these MDGs as it also encompasses programmes for early childhood care, adult literacy programmes, special programmes for nomadic populations, and various non-formal programmes for children and youth who are out of school. Effective implementation of these programmes in the country will surely go a long way towards achieving the first MDG: the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty, in which capacity education is a powerful tool. This is given expression in Nigeria's plan document entitled *National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy* (NEEDS), in which education is recognised as a vital transformational tool and a formidable instrument for socio-economic empowerment (National Planning Commission, 2005). The document which was prepared by the government in its efforts to meet both the development challenges of Nigeria and the

MDGs, acknowledges that the delivery of education in the country has suffered from years of neglect with some 49% of the teaching force being unqualified.

In order to ensure that those who complete the primary and secondary school programmes of the UBE scheme acquire the literacy, numeracy, and basic life skills needed to live meaningful lives and contribute to national development, therefore, the NEEDS document set some goals for education including improving the quality of education at all levels including teacher education. This is no doubt in recognition of the role of education in the empowerment of children who constitute about half of the Nigerian population (National Planning Commission, 2005) as well as adults in the drive toward the attainment of the MDGs. It is also a recognition of the importance of quality teacher education programmes in the production of teachers that will be capable of imparting knowledge of various types to pupils, increasing their acquisition of useful life skills, and imparting healthful habits to them, among other things. In order to meet the requirements for the universal basic education scheme (which will ultimately lead to the attainment of the second MDG i.e. the universal primary education), however, Nigeria needs about 40,000 teachers (Obong, 2006). For these teachers to be effective, they must be products of well designed quality teacher education programmes. Otherwise, the nine years of free and compulsory education provided for in the Universal Basic Education Act could amount to nine years of mere attendance.

Teacher Education and MDGs

Quality teacher education programmes, apart from producing competent teachers for the education system, can also contribute to the attainment of MDGs in various ways. It is obvious that the attainment of the universal primary education component of the MDGs depends on the availability of teachers in sufficient numbers and of sufficient quality to complete the task. For the universal primary education to have the intended impact on the learners, their teachers must be capable of imparting permanent literacy and numeracy and some useful communication and life skills to them. Such teachers cannot accomplish these goals without undergoing a relevant teacher education programme of good quality.

Other possible contributions of viable teacher education programmes to the achievement of MDGs include providing teacher education institutions with appropriate courses in citizenship education, and education for sustainable the environment; useful life skills such as healthful living to reduce the disease burden and risk of HIV/AIDS, decision-making and planning for the future including marriage, relevant aspects of adult education, and, among other things, enlightening mothers about childcare and family planning for improving maternal health and reducing mortality. Adequately exposing the right teachers to such courses under competent trainers will equip them with relevant knowledge and skills, which they can transmit to children and even adults with whom they interact and thereby increase the prospects of not only meeting the goal of universal primary education and other MDGs. It may appear difficult or even unreasonable to add all these courses to a teacher education programme in which students are already carrying full loads. This problem may be resolved by adding them to the list of existing electives and appropriately guiding student teachers into registering for them.

The United Nations Secretary-General has expressed optimism at the possibility of the Millennium Goals being reached worldwide but “only if we break with business as usual” (United Nations, 2005: 1). It is observed in this paper that this dictum is of particular relevance to the situation in Nigeria with regard to quality teacher education. Although the federal government of Nigeria believes that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers, quality is rarely an issue either in the recruitment of teacher candidates or in their training (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1998). It is common knowledge in Nigeria that candidates for teacher education are the generally academically weak students who do not aspire to more prestigious professions (Akinpelu, 1972; Fadipe, 1992). This is mainly because of the low status of teaching as a profession in the country. Many of the students in the nation’s faculties of education are those who could not gain admission into other faculties and departments and have chosen to enter into teacher education programme as a last resort. Most of them are, therefore, neither interested in nor committed to the programme. Although the federal government has prescribed the National Certificate in Education (NCE) as the minimum qualification for teaching, many of the students seeking admission into the colleges of education are those

that could not pass the university matriculation examination for entry into the nation's universities. A large proportion of the students in colleges are those that do not have the requisite entry qualifications but are admitted through the colleges' preliminary studies programmes (Ejeh, 2003) Some colleges even admit some of those students who could not pass the relevant papers at the General Certificate of Education (GCE) ordinary level on the condition that the affected students pledge to pass those subjects before they can be awarded their certificates following the completion of their studies in the colleges. The *Education Sector Status Report* acknowledges that there appears to be many opportunities for anyone who is interested and minimally qualified to enter the teaching profession (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003). In fact one does not necessarily have to be interested in teaching before one enters the teacher education programme in either a university or a college of education.

The issue of quality hardly receives the desired emphasis in the training of student teachers in either colleges of education or in the universities. With the lack or decay of necessary infrastructure in the nation's tertiary institutions and poor funding, the student teachers are not exposed to enriched teacher education programmes. My own experience has shown that student teachers receive inadequate attention from either cooperating teachers in placement schools or their college or university supervisors. In most cases, regular class teachers in the placement schools abandon the classrooms for student teachers as soon as they arrive for teaching practice, thereby affording the latter no opportunities to learn some teaching skills from such teachers. The end result of the poor preparation of teacher candidates is that many of them are not able to give their pupils quality education after the completion of their courses (Anikweze, 1991). Commenting on the quality of the present day teachers, Nuhu Yaqub, the vice-chancellor of one of the Nigerian universities has said that the teacher of today is hardly a teacher because teachers are not as knowledgeable as they ought to be and that they cannot transmit knowledge as they ought to (*Daily Sun*, May 2, 2008). The *Education Sector Status Report* also notes that there are complaints that the teachers produced by the part-time and sandwich programmes mounted by both the universities and colleges of education in the country can barely write an assignment (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003).

The products of teacher education programmes of Nigerian universities and colleges of education are bound to be of low quality as the three major factors that determine quality (i.e. the process of selecting teacher education candidates, the programme of study during the training of the student teachers, and the institutional factors which include staffing, physical facilities, and funding) do not work in favour of academic excellence in most Nigerian teacher education institutions. Quality in this respect refers to the steps taken by higher education institutions responsible for producing teachers to make sure that they are able to perform their jobs or render their services effectively. In other words, the steps they take to ensure that they produce 'quality teachers' instead of the more traditional 'qualified teachers' who just meet certain certification requirements (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006). If teachers are not able to teach primary school pupils well, as is presently the case with many 'qualified' Nigerian primary and secondary school teachers or, if they are not able to impart useful skills to them, then the MDG of achieving universal primary education will be an illusion. This and other education related MDGs can hardly be achieved if there is no change in the present approach to the recruitment and training of teacher education candidates. In order to produce teachers that are capable of making a difference to their students' academic performance, thereby contributing towards achieving both the country's objectives of basic education and the MDG of universal primary education, attention should be turned from a concern about having sufficient numbers of teachers to concern about the number of quality teachers. There is, therefore, the need for a break with business as usual, in regard to teacher education in Nigeria.

Some Implications for Quality Teacher Education

Having a break with business as usual implies that higher education institutions that are responsible for the production of the nation's teachers have to pay more attention to quality assurance. Teacher education candidates should not be the academically weak students or the rejects from other academic programmes. Producing 40,000 or more teachers of weak academic background is not what the nation requires to meet the goals of universal primary education. Such teachers may not be able to adequately impact upon the academic development of the pupils who pass through the system. In other words,

doing more of the same thing or producing more teachers of the same quality as the ones referred to above, will not lead to improvement in the acquisition of literacy, numeracy and other life skills by pupils who go through the universal basic education programme in the country. Having a break with business as usual implies that only the candidates who genuinely meet the admission requirements for teacher education should be offered admission into the nation's tertiary institutions for teacher education. In the opinion of this writer, instead of lowering the standards for admitting students into teacher education programmes, as is presently the practice in some of the colleges of education, the standards should be raised. It might be argued that even with the relatively low standards for admission maintained by some higher education institutions for teacher education candidates, it is difficult to get enough candidates for the programmes. But it is possible that some bright people who might have liked to enter the teaching profession might be dissuaded from doing so because they would not like to rub shoulders with the usually weak candidates who opt for the profession. It stands to reason that only a few people, if any, will aspire to enter a profession that is seemingly meant for academically weak people. Perhaps, adhering to merit and high standards in the selection of teacher education candidates may, in the course of time, begin to attract more and brighter candidates into teacher education programmes in higher education institutions and eventually enhance the status of the teaching profession in the country.

In addition to selecting only qualified candidates, higher education institutions should design appropriate courses and programmes aimed at equipping the teacher candidates with appropriate skills that will enable them not only to effectively impart literacy, numeracy, communication and other life skills, but they should also expose them to the techniques of teaching adults. This will enable them participate effectively in adult education classes where they would have opportunities of teaching adults healthful living and raising their awareness about HIV/AIDS and other diseases and thereby contribute directly towards the achievement of other MDGs. In order to enhance the quality of teacher education programmes, higher education institutions should, in their recruitment processes, ensure that only appropriately qualified educators teach student teachers. Steps should be taken to ensure that student teachers actually benefit from teaching practice

exercises. A true partnership approach to the exercises should be adopted with greater collaboration between teacher education institutions and their placement schools. The roles of both the teachers in the placement schools and those of the student teachers' lecturers should be clearly defined to each party and the former made to play more active roles in teaching student teachers how to teach instead of virtually abandoning their classrooms for student teachers.

It is likely that adhering to quality and high standards in the education of future teachers may lead to Nigeria falling short on the number of teachers required for achieving universal basic education by the year 2015, but it may be better to have relatively few and effective teachers than to have very many ineffective ones. Ensuring quality in the education of teachers may bring about a delay in the achievement of universal primary education in the country but achieving these objectives later is better than not achieving them. In fact, it has already been observed in the Millennium Development Goal Report of 2005 that it is unlikely that the country will be able to meet most of the goals by 2015 (cited in Igbuzor, 2006). The universal basic education scheme adopted in the country is an effective strategy for achieving universal primary education of expected quality only to the extent that serious efforts are made by educational administrators and teacher education institutions to produce quality teachers. It may be better to achieve this and other education-related goals at a later date than to have poor graduates of teacher education programmes who may not have anything to bring about learning in their pupils.

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