
Decentralization in Curriculum Development for Greater Community Participation in Basic Education

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Abstract: *This paper is dialectic on centralization and decentralization models of basic education curriculum development. It posits that in a nation of diversity such as Nigeria, a centralized curriculum may not adequately cater for the developmental need of the distinct communities. The top-down model does not allow for adequate community participation in curriculum development. Thus, in most cases the curriculum is denied local content and context. Many countries across the globe, therefore, are shifting from centralized to decentralized curriculum model. Using documentary sources, this paper contends that since the curriculum is derived from the need of the people, the local communities should make input in curriculum development especially at the basic education level. A decentralized curriculum allows communities opportunity to identify their needs, and use curriculum as tool to achieve their goals. The paper makes recommendations for policy decision which among others, is an enabling law to decentralize the basic education curriculum for greater community participation.*

Key terms: *Basic education, community participation, curriculum development, decentralization*

Introduction

The conflict between centralized and decentralized models of curriculum development is yet unresolved. Proponents of a centralized curriculum model often rely on the need for a uniform standard across the length and breadth of a nation's education system. This in turn will align the curriculum to national philosophy. It is this understanding that has informed the development of Nigeria's curriculum since the curriculum conference of 1969 which culminated in the first post-independent national policy on education of 1977.

However, many education systems across the world are moving away from centralized models of curriculum decision-making towards more democratic, decentralized models. As a result of this trend, decision-makers are considering ways of aligning the curriculum to serve the interest of diverse people. Increasingly, curriculum is being structured in ways which are appropriate to the needs and circumstances of regions and address more effectively the contexts of learners (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014).

Indeed, in a plural society such as Nigeria, there are diversities in cultures and aspirations and these mean varying needs and expectations which a centralized curriculum may not adequately put into account. In the preface to the sixth edition of the National Policy on Education (2013), it is conceded that "Nigeria is a country of rich ethno-cultural diversity of over 350 distinct ethnic groups and over 500 indigenous languages with an estimated population of 170 million" (Obioma, 2013: iii). This diversity in ethno-culture also means diversity in needs and goal aspirations. For instance, nomadic education will not hold the same meaning for

the nomadic population in Northern Nigeria as it will for the non-nomadic populations in the Southern part; just as a curriculum for the children of the Riverine people in the Southern part of Nigeria will not hold the same meaning for the nomads in the Northern part.

A top-down approach to curriculum development therefore is not encouraging. The basic education curriculum needs to be decentralized to cater for the unique developmental needs of the distinct local communities. A curriculum that worths its name must be derived from the need of the people for which it is intended. It is the position of this paper that while both centralized and decentralized models of curriculum development and implementation have their pros and cons, a decentralized model holds greater promise for grassroots developmental needs. It is in this vein that the Nigeria's basic education curriculum needs to be decentralized to address the peculiarity of diverse regions and peoples. This paper, therefore, has been organized under the following sub-headings:

- Basic Education Curriculum Overview
- Centralized Approach to Curriculum Development
- Decentralized Approach to Curriculum Development
- Nature of Community Participation in Basic Education Curriculum
- Recommendations
- Conclusion

Basic Education Curriculum Overview

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) positioned Universal Primary Education (UPE) as one of the eight major goals. The goal anticipated achieving universal primary education by 2015. The inclusion of primary education in the MDGs must have been prompted by the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (EFA) It was also a demonstration of commitment to the Durban statement of commitment (1998) and Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) Decade of Education for Africa (1997–2006), which also requires African states to generalize access to quality basic education as a keystone for sustainable socio-economic development (FRN, 2000).

Thus, following the decision of the Federal Government to introduce UBE programme, the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), re-structured and realigned all extant Primary and Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) curricula into a 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) for implementation in Nigerian Schools (FRN, 2013). The implementation of the 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum commenced nationwide in September 2008 in Primary one and Junior Secondary one (JSS 1) respectively (Obioma, 2012).

The philosophy of the 9-year Basic Education Curriculum is centered on the understanding that every learner who has gone through the 9 years of basic education should have acquired appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, communicative and life-skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values required for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning as a basis for scientific and reflective thinking. However, within the period the curriculum has been implemented some lapses were observed particularly in the number of subjects. This and other factors led to the review of the curriculum. The new curriculum is aimed at improving upon the existing one and it is geared towards meeting the social dynamics of Nigeria, growth in science and technology and making up for the lapses that may have been observed in the previous curriculum.

Reviews are always necessitated by changes in the society and in line with global best practices (Amadi, 2016). The NERDC revised and restructured the 9-Year BEC into 10 teachable, functional and practical oriented subjects namely, English language, Mathematics, Basic Science and Technology, Religion and National Values Education, Cultural and Creative Arts, Business Studies, Nigerian languages, Pre-Vocational Studies, French and Arabic.

The latest review of the BEC in Nigeria however raised some critical issues. First, the rapidity with which reviews are carried out may seem a response to the societal dynamics, but it also shows that Nigeria is yet to get it right as long as basic education curriculum development is concerned. Second, old solution of top-down centralized approach to curriculum development has continued to be maintained even when there appears to be no satisfaction with the previous attempts. This situation calls for a sober reflection.

Centralized Approach to Curriculum Development

National curriculum in most African countries including Nigeria plays the role of engendering cohesion and integration among their fragmented peoples. It has been observed that: ... education contributes to the development of social capital by increasing individual propensity to trust and be tolerant. Learning as a social activity has a strong influence on the development of shared norms and the value placed on tolerance and understanding within a community (Njeng'ere, 2014: 2).

Central governments therefore tend to use a centralized curriculum as an instrument of national cohesion and integration as noticed in Kenya (Njeng'ere, 2014) and Rwanda (Kwibuka, 2015). Moreover, Rwanda wanted to harmonize education programmes within both the East African Community and the Commonwealth group of nations to which the country is a member.

A national curriculum is based on certain principles such as the following as practiced in Croatia, Nigeria, Australia and some other countries:

- ensuring quality education for all (ensuring proper material, personnel and other conditions for quality education throughout the nation, diminishing regional educational differences), and equal education opportunity for all;
- compulsory general education;
- inclusion of all students;
- respecting human and children's rights, especially children's right to education as contained in the UNICEF and AU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- multiculturalism, tolerance, respect for differences, preservation and development of one's own historical and cultural heritage and national identity,
- maintenance of competence and professional ethics, scientific foundation of the curriculum;
- democracy (involvement and responsibility of a wide range of education participants and users), etc. (Ministry of Science, Education & Sports, Croatia, 2007; Australian National Curriculum Bureau, NCB, 2008).

While a national curriculum has its merits, it fails to cater for the diversity of interests and greater participation of communities in managing their affairs. Thus, the present Nigeria's centralized basic education curriculum has attracted some criticisms. For instance, the juxtaposition of the Christian and Islamic values in the new integrated Religion and National Values subject of the basic education curriculum has been condemned (Okogie, 2016). The

Religion and National Values Curriculum, according to Okogie is a danger to 'inter-religious harmony in an already fragile Nigeria'. The thrust of the argument is that:

The curriculum raises at least two sets of issues. One borders on contents, the other on quality. First ...there are good reasons to question the pedagogical principle that informs including materials to be taught in two subjects (Christian Religion Knowledge and Islamic Studies) in one and the same book to be placed in the hands of our young pupils. What is a Christian pupil in possession of the book to make of the content of Islamic studies in one and the same book? And what is a Muslim pupil in possession of the same book to make of the contents of Christian Religious Knowledge in the book? (Okogie, 2016: 19).

The other argument regarding quality is outside the scope of this paper. But from what can be garnered from the preceding argument, a centralized curriculum has the potential of fostering disharmony among diverse interest groups in a nation. Yet, the opposite is claimed in upholding a top-down centralized model (FRN, 2013; Njeng'ere, 2014; Kwibuka, 2015). Moreover, while the trends toward centralized state control of education is responsible for the expansion of educational opportunity in developing countries, it impedes understanding of local needs and has a limited ability to distribute resources in a way that favorably influences school outcomes (Cummings, 1997; Williams, 1997). It therefore brings to the fore, one of the reasons nations with diverse people are shifting to decentralize their curricula especially at the basic education level.

Decentralized Approach to Curriculum Development

Decentralization in education is the transfer of authority to zonal, state and local levels (UNESCO, 2014). It means that the community can participate actively in the decision-making process concerning their education. Decentralization of the curriculum allows for greater participation of the people in curriculum decision making. This follows from the premise that curriculum planning is about choices. These choices are made in line with the demands and aspirations of a given society (Eyibe, 2009).

Modalities of decentralization are diverse and may include: the devolution of power and authority from a higher to a lower level; wider sharing of educational management and governance functions; broader participation in decision making processes; or increased local autonomy in limited policy or management issues. In some cases curriculum decentralization may mean significant change in the bureaucratic structure of ministries of education. For example, decentralization may lead to the devolution of administration and implementation functions from central to zonal, state or local levels (administrative de-concentration).

Many education systems across the world are moving away from centralized models of curriculum decision-making towards more democratic, decentralized models. The decentralization model has the potential to foster the development of localized curricula which directly address a diversity of local (sub-national) cultural and socio-economic realities (UNESCO, 2014). Increasingly, curriculum is being structured in ways which are appropriate to the needs and circumstances of zones and address more effectively the needs of pupils and the local community.

In Ethiopia, a country which shares similar diversity and ethnic tensions as Nigeria, a decentralized system has been adopted. The Ethiopian government's decentralization policy is one strategy to promote the rural and national development that Ethiopia desperately needs

(Swift-Morgan, 2006). This is a sharp departure from the previous central control of primary schooling. In contrast, Ethiopia's current education policy calls for greater community engagement as the final, most localized level of the decentralized system and explicitly mandates participation in school operations and management.

Nature of Community Participation in Basic Education Curriculum

Elsewhere in this paper, it is observed that community has various areas they can participate in curriculum development and implementation. Community participation is a term frequently used and often cited in international educational development. Participation is "a process through which the stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them" (The World Bank, 2000: 2). The term now runs throughout government policy discourse, international funding agency strategic frameworks, and non-governmental organization (NGO) program plans across countries and sectors (Swift-Morgan, 2006). In education, community participation is emerging as a "best practice" thought necessary to achieve universal primary enrollment while improving the quality and relevance of teaching and learning.

The premise for community participation in education is that in traditional society, the community is the primary provider of children's education (Bray, 2000; Williams, 1997). The community therefore needs to be actively involved in formal education of their children. There is the dire need to bring in the relevance of the learners' needs and interest in instructional activities, and to lead learners towards a harmonious relationship with their environment for development. Such harmonious relationship is better achieved through participation of communities in curriculum development.

A decentralized curriculum offers two major benefits: first, education interventions are likely to take local contexts into consideration, making them more effective. This will bring in local contents, norms and values and thereby harmonize the child with his environment (Akpan & Apologu, 2015). Second, supplemental material resources can be an important part of a community's role in supporting schools. The Guinean Ministry of Education (2002) extends the concept of participation in school curriculum and lesson delivery. These models include six domains for community participation in schooling: infrastructure and maintenance, management and administration, teacher support and supervision, pedagogy and classroom support, student supervision, and student recruitment. For communities to have a true effect on school efficiency and student learning, their involvement needs to reach into each of the possible domains (Muskin, 2001; Guinean Ministry of Education, 2002). From the listed domains, it is clear that nothing is said of content of the curriculum, which suggests the same problem of centralization of curriculum development.

Community participation involves more than material provisions. In Tanzania, a variety of institutional needs has been catered for by parents through school committee suggesting the learning objectives and thus influencing curriculum development (Nkyabonaki, 2013). For instance, parents called for the inclusion of the vocational training skills in the primary school curriculum. This is a landmark of how the society's need of learning by doing has come to be incorporated in the curriculum objectives (Kyabonaki, 2013). While community participation in Nigeria is felt in other areas, same cannot be said of curriculum making- participation in decision-making about the content of the curriculum for their children.

Taking a look at the Wheeler's model, three out of the five phases in the model, namely selection of aims, selection of content and evaluation are desirous of community participation

though at varying degrees. For instance, under the selection of aim phase, the community is studied in order to understand its norms, beliefs, values, taboos, relationship, etc (Asimonye, 2011). Curriculum specialists involve the community in order to understand the environment in which the curriculum operates. Again it is important that the community interest and needs are considered while selecting content. The community needs to see the content as something that can solve their problems. Moreover, the school tends to stop at summative evaluation of learners, and no follow-up action is taken thereafter to ascertain the impact of the curriculum. The community can play a major role in providing feedback on the impact of the basic education programme based on the performance of leavers in the local community.

Recommendations

1. Given that Nigeria subscribes to democracy which is government of the people, by the people and for the people, the people should be allowed more opportunities to make more input in curriculum development.
2. The Parents Teachers Association (PTAs) should be empowered to make greater input in the area of curriculum development by suggesting curriculum content of the basic education programme.
3. Communities should be encouraged through their relevant agencies like the age-grade, women organizations and village groups to give issues bordering on basic education a pride of place.
4. The federal government should restrict its jurisdiction to the area of policy and finance and allow the local communities to decide in partnership with local practitioners on the content of the curriculum.
5. Post-basic education evaluation should be introduced to allow for community assessment of the impact of the programme on leavers.

Conclusion

A centralized approach to curriculum decision making has been variously criticized for not promoting greater community participation. To this end countries are now shifting towards a more decentralized model that ensures greater community participation in curriculum development. While each model has its pros and cons, this paper posits that a decentralized curriculum model is better for greater community participation; and communities can participate at three levels of selections of aim, content and evaluation of the basic education curriculum.

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