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# Back to the Basics: How to Fix UBE and Public Basic Education in Nigeria

By **BOLAJI ABDULLAHI**

Section 4 of the National Policy on Education of 2004 states that the goals of primary education in Nigeria are to:

- a. inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively...
- b. provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including *preparation for the trades and crafts of the locality*<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, it is expected that at a specified age, every Nigerian child would have acquired the foundational cognitive skills that they could build on in a latter life of vocation or further learning. It is clearly recognised that without these foundational skills, the ability to read and write and perform basic mathematical functions, a human being cannot fully function as a productive political or economic citizen. Therefore, to deny a child the opportunity for basic education is to devalue the child's citizenship and undermine the basis on which all future capabilities are built.

Apart from education being a part of the general constitutional right<sup>2</sup>, it is not surprising that the right to basic education is specifically guaranteed under the Child's Rights Act (CRA), which states that:

"Every child has the right to free, compulsory, and universal basic education, and it shall be the duty of the government in Nigeria to provide such education<sup>3</sup>."

<sup>1</sup> The 4th amended version; The portion in italics is author's emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Section 18 (3) of the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Section 15 (1) of the Child's Rights Act, 2003.



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The Universal Basic Education (UBE) was launched in 1999. Its enabling Act, the UBE Act of 2004, reinforces the CRA and makes it a responsibility for every government in Nigeria to “provide free, compulsory, and universal basic education for every child of primary and junior secondary school age. More than two decades after the UBE was launched, it is important to examine the extent to which the programme has delivered on its key objectives of getting every child into school and equipping them with basic cognitive skills as stated by the national policy.

It would appear that some progress has been made in terms of enrollment as there are more children attending school today than at any other time in our history<sup>4</sup>. But we still have more children out of school than any other country in the world. Therefore, Nigeria’s enrollment figures, in or out school, may only be relative to its population size. In absolute terms, however, Nigeria has between 13 and 20 million children out of school<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of learning achievements, it has also been widely reported that Nigerian children are seriously falling behind. In its January 25, 2023 edition, The Guardian cited a UNICEF report that 75% of 14-year-old Nigerians cannot read a simple sentence or solve basic mathematical problems<sup>6</sup>. This confirms an earlier report in 2018 that only 20% percent of those completing primary school in Nigeria can read<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, even when more kids are going to school, they have not been doing much of *learning*.

Indeed, the reality would suggest that Nigerians who are parents today got better education from public primary schools than their children are getting now, even twenty-four years after the UBE. In the past it could be taken for granted that any child completing basic education in Nigeria would have attained the appropriate levels of proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic. Not anymore. Quite ironically, the chances that a child would acquire these competencies now lies outside the public schools and depend on the ability of the parents to pay.

Having lost faith in the public education system, parents who could afford to pay have opted out of UBEC-funded primary schools, leaving only those who are too poor to afford even the cheapest of fee-paying private schools or those who reside in places where such option is not available. The failure of children to learn from public schools, would, in fact, suggest that the more children we have attending those schools, the more children we have who are in danger of acquiring no education for a future life of further learning or employment. In only a few decades, Nigeria’s prosperity and progress will be determined by these children. Their inability to learn the skills to solve even the basic problems they will encounter clearly has serious implications for Nigeria’s social cohesion as well as future economic and human capital development objectives.

The issue of out-of-school children remains pertinent to any conversation about universal basic education. So much has been written about this in the past, and different factors have been identified as responsible for slow enrollment in different parts of the country or disparity in enrollments along gender lines within the same region of the country. However, the main focus of this paper is on improving the quality of basic education in the country.

We will start with a brief review the Universal Primary Education (UPE), launched in 1976 as the first national initiative on primary education and show how the challenges encountered with its implementation conditioned the design of its successor programme, the Universal Basic Education (UBE). We will then highlight the key problems with the implementation of the UBE since inception. We will argue for institutional and policy reforms and practices that will seek to enhance effectiveness in funding, greater efficiency in governance, as well as improved quality of teaching and teachers as pathways to achieving better learning outcomes in the schools.

Our considered conclusion is that any effort aimed at reforming basic education in the country must focus on how to make the schools better at teaching children. Therefore, we need to invest more on the factors that determine learning outcomes and bring all of them into play to give children a real shot at learning.



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4 Akinwunmi F.S. Trends in School Enrolment of Primary School Education in Nigeria between 1984 and 2002. <https://www.academia.edu/43755361/> and UBEC website: <https://ubec.gov.ng/>

5 <https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria-now-has-20-million-out-of-school-children-says-unesco/>

6 <https://guardian.ng/news/75-of-nigerian-children-cant-read-simple-sentence-says-unicef/>.

7 <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/261106-20-nigerian-children-can-read-primary-school-world-bank.html?tztc=1>. This report is also in line with the author’s experience as commissioner for education in Kwara state (2007-2011)

## Lessons from the Past: The Universal Primary Education (UPE)

The Universal Primary Education (UPE) was launched by the Federal Military Government in September 1976 as a first step in a general plan to provide equal opportunities for all citizens to acquire education at all levels. UPE was intended to address the imbalance in educational opportunities between the north and the south of the country as well as between rural and urban areas. Fundamentally, the planners believed that education could be used to promote national unity and understanding in the aftermath of the civil war.

The plan was to bring all six-year-olds in the country to school starting from 1976 and to ensure that by 1981, all children of primary school age are enrolled. Based on this plan, it was projected that 6.4 million children would enroll in the first year. However, to everyone's shock, over 8.2 million children turned up, and by the following year, this figure had reached 9.5 million. Some states actually recorded over 200% increase from the immediate pre-UPE year, while some states received on resumption date, more children than they had registered. Thus, the government was confronted with "a tidal wave of swiftly swelling pupil enrollment."<sup>8</sup> As a result, classrooms, furniture, books, teachers etc., became grossly inadequate. Some states resorted to running two school shifts—morning and afternoon. Some had to improvise make-shift classrooms, under trees, with palm fronds and zinc. Teachers had to be recruited who themselves were barely literate, with majority having only two years of UPE teacher's college training. In some states, up to 40% of teachers had only primary VII education<sup>9</sup>. Emergency contracts for classrooms and supplies were awarded which were never delivered or were not delivered to specifications. It was a mess.

At the time the UPE was being planned, Nigeria had just happened on unprecedented oil wealth. In 1974, crude oil output was 2.3 million barrels per day (bpd). However, by 1976, within two months of the launch of the UPE, output dropped to 1.5 million bpd, which fell further in the following year, along with the price<sup>10</sup>. It soon became clear that the hope that the Federal Government would fund the entire UPE plan had been misplaced. Curiously, even in the face of dwindling revenue and the emerging financial and implementation challenges on the UPE, the Federal Government announced that secondary, technical and post-secondary would also be free from 1977.<sup>11</sup> However, by 1978/79, the Federal Government had begun to transfer some responsibilities to the states and the local governments. The 1979 Blueprint on Educational Policy recommended that the three tiers of government should share the responsibility for primary education as shown in the table below<sup>12</sup>:

Table 1: *Distribution of Responsibility under UPE, 1979*

<b>Federal Government</b>	Provide grants to states for payment of salaries of primary school teachers
<b>State Governments</b>	Capital costs: buildings, furniture, fittings, books, registers diaries, State Allowances and other entitlements, including pensions
<b>Local Governments</b>	Salaries of non-teaching staff, first aid, staff quarters and toilets.

At this time however, the cost had become so high that education was the single largest budget item in most states<sup>13</sup>. This led to increase in taxation. Even then, the promise of free universal primary education had become such a financial burden; so much that one state governor remarked that the reference to the UPE as free was a "misnomer"<sup>14</sup> and as a result, people had to pay more tax or parents had to be willing to take some of the responsibilities. It was becoming clear at this point that the degree of commitment by each level of government to the free UPE programme had considerably dwindled<sup>15</sup>. Not unexpectedly, some states started to reintroduce some fees. Apart from being designed to be free at inception, UPE was expected to be compulsory by 1979.

8 Marg Craspo (1983). Universal Primary Education in Nigeria: Its Problems and Implications. African Studies Review, Vol. 26, No. 1 (March 1983), pp. 91-106, Cambridge University Press.

9 Marg C (1983). Op. cit.

10 Marg C (1983). Op. cit.

11 Uchendu, V. (1979) Education and Politics in Tropical Ltd.

12 Blueprint: Implementation Committee for the National Policy on Education, 1977-1979, Government Printer, Lagos 1979, pp 55-59 Cited in Dennis A. Africa Spectrum, 1986, Vol. 21, No.2 (1986, pp. 163-174

13 Marg Craspo, 1983 Opp. Cit.

14 West Africa, January 16, 1978.

15 Dennis A (1986). The Deepening Crisis in Nigerian Education: A Contribution to the debate on the demise of Universal Primary Education (UPE) Africa Spectrum, Op.cit.



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However, overwhelmed by the financial burden and other crises of implementation, no one was talking about this anymore. Instead, Professor Sanya Onabamiro, Chairman of the Implementation Committee of the education policy said the scheme should have been delayed until 1979 to allow more time to recruit teachers and build the required classrooms.

When the UPE was launched in 1976, one writer described it as “a rapid campaign on a massive scale – an ambitious drive for modernity.”<sup>16</sup> But only three years later, UPE had become known to many as “Unfulfilled Promise Education” or “Useless Primary Education”<sup>17</sup>.

## The Introduction of Universal Basic Education (UBE)

Quite incidentally, it was the same man who launched the UPE as military Head of State that returned 23 years after as an elected president to launch the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999. Although the UBE fell within the global development agenda at the turn of the millennium, it is difficult not to imagine that President Olusegun Obasanjo saw the UPE as an unfinished business and his return to power as an opportunity to correct some of the mistakes that made the scheme to fall short of expectations. Thus, the UBE differed from its predecessor in two significant ways. Whereas, UPE was only universal and free, the UBE is *universal, free and compulsory*, prescribing specific penalties for parents who fail to enroll their school-age children. But more importantly, unlike the previous scheme which suffered from difficulty in funding and lack of clarity about who pays for what, the UBE had a ring-fenced funding source with a built-in mechanism that guarantees contribution from states in form of counterpart funding.

Section 11(2) of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBE) Act, 2004 and Section 12(2) of the Education Reform Act, 2007 outline the funding mechanism of the UBE in the country. They establish *counterpart funding* between the Federal Government and the state governments as the basis for funding basic education in the country. In this wise, “the state shall contribute half (50%) of the total cost of projects to be executed in the State [in order to] ensure commitment in the execution of the projects.”

The UBE Act of 2004 also established the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) to coordinate, alongside the states and the local governments, the delivery of basic education in the country and to monitor the implementation. Although, the UBE Act recognizes that the funding of basic education remains the responsibilities of the states and the local governments, it gives UBEC the responsibility for managing the 2% of the Consolidated Revenue Accounts allocation to basic education as intervention fund to “assist” the states and the local governments in the implementation of the UBE.

## UBEC: A Funding Agency or an Education Agency?

Perhaps, the planners of the UBE must have persuaded themselves that the major reason the UPE failed was the chaos that attended its funding. The issue of money therefore loomed larger than any other consideration in their planning for this latter initiative. Although the Act also assigns the responsibilities for policy formulation, prescription of minimum standards, among others to UBEC, it is clear that its governance structures were designed primarily to manage funds and ensure “judicious utilisation” of funds in line with the approved action plans submitted by the states. Although one of the main goals of basic education is to “inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively” in the children, there is no evidence that the Commission considers the progress by states in meeting this fundamental objective in awarding its grants. Rather, its preoccupation with funds utilisation would suggest that the Commission understands its role as primarily that of funds management.

In support of this view is the fact that the department responsible for conducting annual monitoring exercise is the Finance & Accounts Department of the Commission, which then prepares “*progress* report on the implementation of the UBE programme for presentation to Mr. President as required by Section 9(h) of the UBE Act, 2004<sup>18</sup>.” Needless to say, UBEC report of “*progress*” to the president is based on funds being “*judiciously utilised*” rather than actual progress in pre-determined learning objectives. The fact that UBEC did not find it necessary to withhold funds to any of the



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16 Bray, M. (1981) *Universal Primary Education in Nigeria.: A Study of Kano State*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

17 Marg Craspo, 1983 Opp. Cit.

18 UBEC Annual Report 2018. (Abuja, 2018), p.45

states between 2005 and 2019 would mean also that the Commission was satisfied that the states actually utilised the funds for the purposes that were approved in their action plans regardless of whether actual learning was taking place in the schools or not<sup>19</sup>.

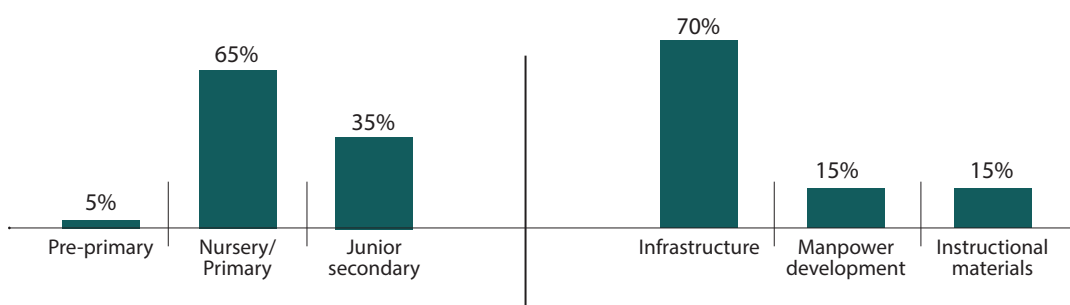
More often than not, public conversations about education invariably comes to how much government is spending on education, with the famous UNESCO prescription of 26% of national budget as the benchmark. However, while Nigeria may be spending less on education proportionate to its budget size, the country has spent more in absolute terms since the advent of the UBE than at any other time in its history. Available reports indicate that between a 15-year period (2005-2019) the sum of N342 billion has been released in grants alone to all the states and the FCT. Adding states' matching contributions will bring this amount to N684 billion.<sup>20</sup> If other interventions by UBEC, staff salaries and other recurrent expenditure by the states, as well as donor support funds are added, this amount gets much bigger. However, it has been widely noted that for most developing countries, there is a "fairly weak" correlation between increased resource allocation to the education sector and improved learning outcomes<sup>21</sup>. This appears to be the case for Nigeria. The problem seems to be that of allocative efficiency than the amount being allocated itself. Even as a funding agency, UBEC funding has failed to target those factors that are likely to improve learning.

## Fund Allocation and Learning Outcomes

The UBEC disbursement takes place quarterly, provided that on each occasion the state is able to provide the exact sum to match the UBEC disbursement based on the action plan that it must have submitted to the Commission. Upon receiving the grants, states are required to expend 5% on pre-primary/nursery, and 60%, 35% on junior secondary. For each level of basic education, 70% of the allocation received is to be apportioned for infrastructure, 15% for manpower development (which includes non-teaching staff) and 15% on instructional materials.

However, at best, this spending guidelines appear to be based more on assumptions than hard evidence in terms of what needs to be done to educate children. There may not be universal agreement on what factors actually determine learning in different countries or regions of the world, and even between rural and urban areas within the same country. However, there is a strong consensus that inputs such as textbooks and learning materials, effectiveness of school inspection, teacher and teaching quality, quality of curriculum and instructional time, rank much higher in determining whether children learn or not than "hard inputs" like school buildings and furniture.<sup>22</sup>

### Distribution of funds for each level



However, it is possible yet again, that the planners of UBE have favoured classroom construction above everything else, based on their UPE mindset. The Act itself betrays this project mindset when its states categorically that the 50% contribution by the states is towards project execution: *"the State shall contribute half (50%) of the total cost of projects to be executed in the State [in order*

19 The closest thing to monitoring learning standards in the Commission is done by its 14-member Quality Assurance department whose reports, according to the department itself, no one really cares about: "The challenges that the department encountered is, among other things: 1. Non-implementation of recommendations contained in quality assurance reports by stakeholders (UBEC, SUBEB, LGEA, Schools and stakeholders)." See UBEC Annual Report, 2018, Ibid, page 63.

20 See also [http://yourbudget.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/education-financing .pdf](http://yourbudget.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/education-financing.pdf)

21 Pritchett, L (2013). Rebirth of Education: Schooling Ain't Learning. Centre for Global Development, Washington DC, 20036.

22 See for example: Muvawala J. (2012) Determinants of Learning Outcomes for Primary Education: A Case of Uganda; Journal statistique africain, numéro 15, août 2012. World Bank, 1990, Primary Education Policy Paper, Washington DC and Pritchett L. (2013). Op. Cit.



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to] ensure commitment in the execution of the projects. It is also possible that allocating the bulk of the resources to construction of classrooms provides perverse incentives for everyone involved, as some have argued. However, another possible explanation is that in designing the spending formula, it was not considered necessary to establish first what inputs contribute most to learning outcome and distribute the resources accordingly. In fact, where classroom has featured as a factor in learning, it is usually in relation to how many children should be in a class to make for effective teaching. Even then, there is no consensus on whether smaller class size actually helps children to learn better<sup>23</sup>. A beautiful classroom may also attract children to come to school, but it does not in itself guarantee that they would learn.

This is not an argument against classroom and beautiful schools. But if after 24 years of UBE and billions of Naira spent, most of the students still cannot read or do simple arithmetic after completing basic education, it means our approach has not worked, and we cannot persist on doing the same thing that we have done from the start. We must therefore, reset our spending priorities and allocate more resources to those factors that can actually help us out of this learning crisis.

### Whose Priority Counts: the Federal or the Local?

There is yet another problem with the UBEC prescriptive approach, which has turned out to be an encumbrance to the states and the commission as well. As at May 2023, UBEC reported that several states have failed to access funds allocated to them for basic education and up to N46 billion that should have gone the states was still in the Commission's account.<sup>24</sup> It is easy to understand why this is so.

The UBE Act made it clear that the "Federal Government's intervention under the Act shall only be an assistance to the states and the local governments for the purpose of uniform and qualitative basic education throughout Nigeria."<sup>25</sup> In essence, the Act recognises that the primary responsibilities for basic education belong to the states and the local governments, and the Federal Government is only assisting for the purpose of maintaining *quality* and *uniformity*. Therefore, by asking each state to contribute 50% as matching grants, it ensures that all the states in the country are uniformly committed, and that the same amount of money is guaranteed to each state from the federal pot. Herein lies the problem. A framework that guarantees uniformity may not be helpful in achieving quality. Since the baseline standards are not the same for all the states, priorities are therefore bound to be different in terms of what is required to achieve quality of education in each state.

While the Act states that the Federal Government is "only assisting" the state, it seems to have no qualms prescribing to the states what its spending priority should be. Once the state pays the counterpart fund and draws down, the entire funds must be utilised within the guidelines specified by UBEC, regardless of what the state may consider as its priority. For example, the decision to disarticulate Junior Secondary from the Senior Secondary has left many states requiring more resources for junior secondary in recent years. But they still have to stay within the 35% prescribed in the funding framework. With stories of dilapidated classrooms and generally decrepit learning environments still widespread across the country, it is difficult to argue against allocating 70% of the grant to infrastructure. However, situations do vary from state to state. Nevertheless a state that considers teacher training or instructional materials as its priority is still constrained to spend 70% of the grant on infrastructure. For states like this, the UBEC grant then become a constraint. Such states would therefore rather not take the grant. That way, they can freely decide how to expend whatever they should have paid as counter-part fund.

### Search for Appropriate Governance Structure

It is a trite principle in governance that funds should be allocated closest to the point of implementation or where results are most expected; in this case, the schools. This has not been the case with the UBE. The constitutional responsibility for basic education is that of the Local Governments. But this is true only in nominal terms. In majority of the states, the involvement of local governments in the administration of basic education does not exceed payment of staff salaries.



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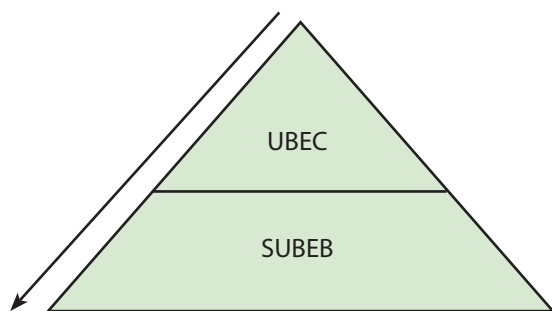


23 Muvawala J. (2012) Determinants of Learning Outcomes for Primary Education: A Case of Uganda; Journal statistique africain, numéro 15, août 2012

24 <https://punchng.com/basic-education-suffers-as-governors-fail-to-access-n46-2bn-ubec-fund/>

25 The Compulsory Free, Universal, Basic Education Act, 2004

Figure 1: **Current structure: centralised, top-to-bottom.**

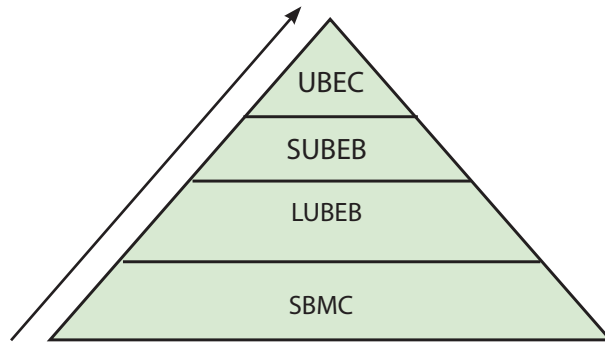


Since inception, the management of basic education has been a two-way business between the states and the Federal Government, leaving out two critical stakeholders, the local governments and the schools, which essentially play no role in deciding how resources are allocated or expended. Although the basic education system is represented at the federal level by the UBEC and at the state level by the SUBEB, the local governments are still stuck with the Local Government Education Authority (LGEA), system, effectively excluding that tier of government from the UBE framework, in terms of policy making and implementation. The “action plans” prepared by the states are about what should happen in the schools. Unfortunately, the schools do not have any inputs into these. Although attempts have been made in recent years to mobilise communities to play a lead role in the management of their schools through the School-Based Management Committee (SBMC), this has not met with much success.

In 1996, the National Council on Education directed each state to set up a School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) for each school. The committee, which brings together heads of school, parents, teachers, pupils and local leaders, including religious and community leaders, is to serve as the governing board for each school. Where they have been trained, the SBMC are to prepare the annual School Development Plan, including infrastructure and operational needs. Various reports observe that most schools did not set up this committee, or where they exist, they have not functioned well enough. However, SBMC has been shown to have positive effect on school performance and even pupils’ learning achievements in places where they have been effective<sup>26</sup>. If nothing else, they serve as the first-line monitoring body in ensuring that children come to school and teachers turn up to teach.

The current system that rigidly prescribes spending formula to states needs to be abolished. Apart from the misalignment between inputs and what is required to get the desired outcomes, it also constrains the states and overlooks their priorities. In creating a more derived system, Local Universal Basic Education Board should be set up to replace the current LGEA. This immediately integrates the local government into the UBE framework. Establishment of the SBMC needs to be elevated above policy prescription and be made a legal requirement as an integral part of the UBE management system. The action plan that would be submitted to UBEC, especially those that have to do with physical infrastructure and teaching materials, should be based on each school’s development plan, through the LUBEB, and the SUBEB. Once the grants are released, it would follow the same route back to the school to implement the development plan. Different accountability measures can be devised to ensure effective utilisation by the schools, but the key principle is decentralisation which supports the community to take primary responsibility for the schools, while government enforces accountability to ensure “judicious utilisation” of funds released to the SBMCs.

26 <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/importance-functioning-school-based-management-committees-sbmcs-evidence-nigeria>

Figure 2: **Decentralised: Bottom-to-top**

A decentralised approach ensures that all schools receive equal attention. In a centralised system where the decisions on construction or renovation of classrooms, for example, are taken at the SUBEB level, it is difficult not to overlook some schools or to ensure that resources are equitably distributed among schools. This partly explains why even in states where education has received strong attention, there are still schools in terrible conditions. The SBMC approach will ensure that every school has opportunity to make its case and to receive fund for its infrastructure requirement.

### Bringing Private Schools into the Public Education Mix

Nothing has made a mockery of government's promise of free education like the explosion of private schools across the country. It is difficult to establish how many private primary schools there are in the country. It would however be safe to assume that there are more private schools in the country today than there were before the UBE was launched in 1999. It is perhaps, one of the biggest ironies of modern education in Nigeria that the more money government spends to provide free education, the more parents are willing to pay for private school for their children. In fact, anywhere a private school exists, it would be difficult to find parents who would rather send their children to a public school, unless they are too poor to afford even the cheapest private school or they really don't care about education at all. Why is this so?

In almost all cases that have sought to compare performance between public and private schools in terms of students learning achievements, the private schools have been shown to perform better. More often than not, they operate with no government support or supervision, yet there is overwhelming evidence that private schools tend to deliver better learning outcomes<sup>27</sup>.

In 2011, researchers were able to identify 12, 098 of such private schools in Lagos, with total enrollment of 1, 385, 190 pupils, representing about 61% of total enrollment in the state<sup>28</sup>. Even in Makoko, arguably one of the world's poorest urban slums, 87% of parents preferred private schools for their children. Most parents interviewed said they prefer private schools because they can see that teachers are present and are teaching. They can also see that their children are able to master basic skills that other children attending government schools are not able to<sup>29</sup>. Another explanation for why parents have preferred private schools is its "short-route" accountability system. The client/service provider relationship between parents and the schools tends to put the schools on their toes. Although it has been found that teachers in private schools are generally less qualified and less paid than their counterparts in government schools, they tend to work harder because one dissatisfied parent—customer—could lead to loss of job by the teacher and loss of revenue to the school owner. The reasons given by parents in Lagos have been found to be generally consistent with other parts of the country.<sup>30</sup> It is also interesting to see how these reasons align with some of the factors identified earlier as contributing most to learning outcomes:



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27 Gruijters, R. J., Alcott, B. and Rose, P. (2020) The Effect of Private Schooling on Learning Outcomes in South Asia and East Africa: A Within-Family Approach. Working Paper No. 20/7., REAL Centre, University of Cambridge. 10.5281/zenodo.3686733

28 Härmä Joanna, (2011), Private responses to state failure: the growth in private education (and why) in Lagos, Nigeria Dr. <https://ncspe.tc.columbia.edu/working-papers/files/OP215.pdf>

29 . Härmä, J. (2011). Op.cit.

30 Umar, A. 2008. "Nigeria". In Low-cost Private Education, ed. B. Phillipson. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.



Table 2: **Why Private Schools Have an Edge**

Why Parents prefer private schools	Factors that determine learning outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers turn up for work and they actually teach.</li> </ul>	Teaching and teachers Instructional time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children who attend private schools demonstrate mastery of basic skills</li> </ul>	Children's ability to learn Passing culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents see themselves as clients to schools and therefore can demand better service.</li> </ul>	"Short-route" accountability Effective supervision/Monitoring

Like Härmä noted, "Due to wide-ranging failures, parents are having to buy educational services and are missing out on their rights to free primary education<sup>31</sup>." But this situation is not peculiar to Nigeria. Several other countries have also experienced sudden explosion in private schools in recent years in a situation not too dissimilar to that of Nigeria. However, countries have responded differently. In 1981, Chile introduced its now world-famous educational voucher system that allows children in elementary and secondary schools to use government-issued vouchers to either pay for a year of education at a public school or to contribute to tuition charged in a fee-paying private school. In India, the Rights to Education Bill, an equivalent of our UBE, mandates all private schools to reserve 25% of their seats for "poor and marginalised children" at cost to government.<sup>32</sup>

In both cases, but especially in the case of India, government appears ready to penalise itself for failing to deliver on its promise of quality education in public schools. It also acknowledges that private schools are performing better and is willing to help children from poor homes to also have access to better education, thereby closing the gap on social inequality. It is important to note that in both cases of Chile and India, these interventions are without prejudice to efforts to make public schools better. But governments in both countries realise that if they must wait for their reforms to bear fruits, children would outgrow schooling opportunities. Private schools on the other hand tend to offer lower hanging fruits that governments could tap into if they must deliver on their promise of quality education for all.

Governments at the state and federal levels in Nigeria have to see the need to engage the private schools better. This has to start with the government acknowledging that its failure to deliver on the promise of education that is driving parents to the private schools. At the moment, government at all levels, is either indifferent or antagonistic to private schools. This needs to change. Government must recognize the role they play in educating Nigerian children and support them accordingly. After all, every single child that is able to achieve the specified learning objectives moves the government closer to fulfilling its plan to get every child educated, regardless of whether this was done in public or private schools.

### Improving Teaching and Teachers

If there is one point on which everyone agrees, it is the most important factor that determines whether children will learn or not is the quality of teaching and teachers. It seems natural, therefore, that the most important reform that needs to take place in our schools is that which focuses on improving the quality of teaching and instructions. As is widely acknowledged, the quality of any education system cannot rise above the quality of its teachers. Our main concerns therefore should be:

- How do we get the right people to become teachers?
- How do we develop them into effective teachers?
- How do we target support to keep them on the job and ensure children learn from them?



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31 Härmä J. (2011). Op.cit.

32 Chudgar A and Quin E., (2012) Relationship between private schooling and achievement: Results from rural and urban India. Economics of Education Review, Volume 31, Issue 4, August 2012, Pages 376-390

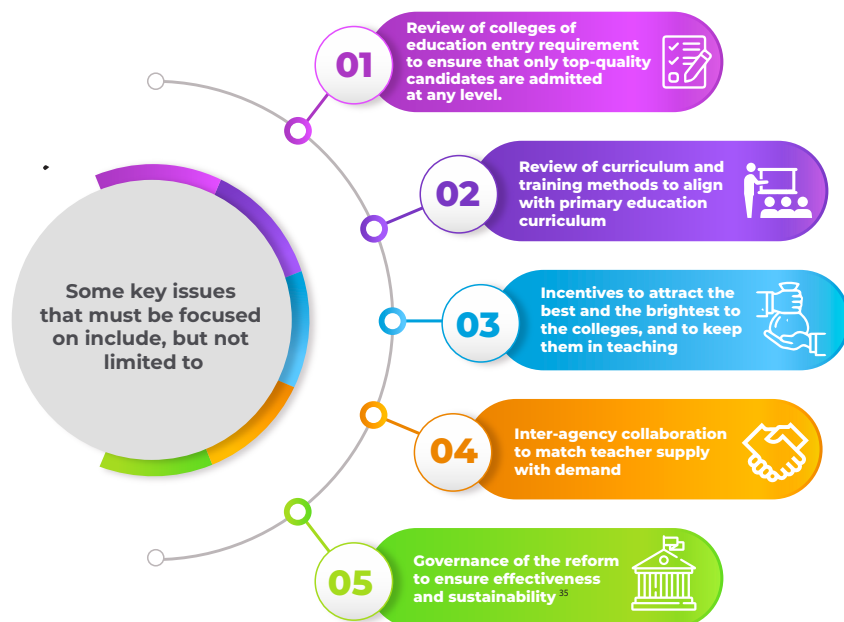
To answer these questions, we must prioritise reform of the teacher education and recruitment system as well as in-service training system. According to the Teacher Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), a qualified teacher is one who holds the minimum teaching requirement of the Nigeria Certificate of Education (NCE) and is also registered with the TRCN as a teacher. In May 2023, the Council reported that 83% of teachers in Nigeria’s public schools are qualified, while only about 30% of those who teach in private schools are qualified<sup>33</sup>. TRCN’s assessment of “qualified” teachers may be true, but it hides the grim reality of the crisis of teacher quality and competence across the country. Qualification does not necessarily mean quality. This would explain why many private schools are getting results with “less qualified” teachers than the public schools.

In states where Teacher Development Needs Assessment (TDNA) has been successfully carried out; the results show that majority of teachers who are in service are not able to pass basic literacy, numeracy and pedagogical tests although they are mostly qualified<sup>34</sup>.

One thing that is consistent with all countries that have witnessed remarkable and sustained improvements in teaching over the years is that they ensure that only the best candidates get to become teachers and entry is strictly controlled. This is the direct opposite of what obtains in Nigeria where standards are lowered for those who want to become teachers and entry appears to be free-for-all. This has to change.

● **Pre-service Training**

The National Policy on Education specifies that the minimum requirement for becoming a teacher in Nigeria is the Nigeria Certificate of Education (NCE). Reform of the Colleges of Education therefore has to be a core component of any efforts to improve the quality of teaching at the primary school level. The starting point for the reform of teacher education must be the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), which sets standards and regulates the Colleges of Education in Nigeria. The good news here is that the NCCE itself appears to be aware of the challenges to teacher education in the country and has actually demonstrated a strong appetite for reform. What is required is to provide the right political leadership that will drive the reform in a coherent manner.



● **In-service Training**

The biggest threat to improving learning achievements in public schools is that majority of the teachers lack the knowledge and skills required to teach effectively. These teachers also potentially pose the most serious obstacles to any efforts to improve the quality of teaching in the schools. Many have found themselves in teaching as a last resort, they are therefore usually demotivated

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33 <https://saharareporters.com/2023/05/24/more-half-private-school-teachers-south-west-nigeria-not-qualified-registration->

34 <https://dailytrust.com/paradox-teachers-failing-while-their-students-pass-exams-4/>

35 A 2011 National Teacher Education Policy (NTEP) outlines similar objectives but no serious action appears to have been taken towards implementing the recommendations.

and more interested in keeping their jobs because of the salaries rather than in helping the students to learn. This makes intervention politically contentious and delicate. Experience has however shown that the most successful teacher improvement programmes in the country are those that are able to guarantee job-security while creatively and continuously improving capacity in classroom contexts. This is consistent with the author's experience in Kwara State.

**Table 3: The Case of Kwara State.**

*From Zeros to Heroes.*

In 2008, Kwara State decided to administer an assessment test to teachers in the state's public schools as part of its teacher development programme. The test was based on the Primary 4 curriculum for English, Mathematics and Civics, as well as some pedagogical questions.

After weeks of negotiation with the union of teachers, an agreement was signed, witnessed by the state's Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), that no teacher would be sacked or penalised regardless of his or her performance in the test.

With the help of the DFID's Education Sector Support Project in Nigeria (ESSPIN), testing experts were brought in from Oxford University to design the tests. After a dry run in Lagos and Jigawa states, the test was administered with the minimum pass threshold set at 80% for each of the subjects. About 19,000 teachers sat for the test, but less than 100 were able to meet the minimum threshold. This sent shockwaves across the state. But having committed to not penalising any teacher for failing the assessment, we were now faced with a serious problem, worse than anyone could have imagined before the test was conducted.

With the help of our partners, the ESSPIN, we developed a *Teaching Manual (TM)* for every topic in the curriculum from Primary 1-6 for literacy and numeracy. The TM was like a cookery book, which did not really require the teacher to have any prior subject or teaching knowledge. The teacher only needed to be able to read and follow the clearly-stated instructions on how to teach each topic on the curriculum.

We then called for volunteers from the three Colleges of Education in the state and organised them into the State's Schools Improvement Team (SSIT). We also set up another group made up of senior teachers, especially those who were able to achieve the minimum threshold in the tests and organised them into the Schools' Support Officers (SSOs). After undergoing their own training, the SSITs then trained the SSOs who would then train the teachers on how to use the TMs.

All the schools in the state were now organised into clusters of not more than five schools per cluster under one SSO. Each cluster met every weekend for training on the use of the TM by their assigned SSOs. Thereafter, the SSO visited each school at least once during the week to observe the teachers in action. These observations were then discussed at the cluster meeting at the end of the week. The SSOs routinely report to the SSITs, who advise them on a continuous basis.

The State Government took notice of the teachers' commitments and rewarded them by paying the 27.5% Teachers Special Allowance that they had demanded before the exercise. More importantly, the parents were quick to take note of the transformations in the schools, and many began to return their children to the public schools.

What the experience from Kwara State as well as other similar donor-supported interventions on Teacher Development Programme (TDP) in some states suggest is that even the complex problem of teachers' development can be tackled with little or no political risk. These approaches have to be studied more and scaled up across the country. Ideally, each state should take responsibility for the training of its own teachers. However, the Federal Government still shares in the responsibility to ensure that children are able to learn. Therefore, federal level agencies need to get involved as well.

At the moment, it is not clear which federal agency has the primary responsibility for teacher development in the country. The TRCN says its mandates include "accreditation, monitoring and

supervision of the courses and programmes of teacher training institutions in Nigeria to ensure that they meet national and international standards. The institutions include the Colleges of Education, Faculties and Institutes of Education in Nigerian universities, Schools of Education in the Polytechnics, and the National Teachers Institute.<sup>36</sup> However, this statement appears merely aspirational. In reality, it is the NCCE that accredits and monitors courses for the colleges of education, while the National Universities Commission (NUC) does the same for the universities. Even regarding registration of teachers, the TRCN hardly has anything more than exhortatory power. By its own account, more than 70% of teachers in private schools are still able to teach without the required qualifications<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, reform of key institutions charged with the responsibility for professional development and certification of teachers such as the National Teachers Institute (NTI) and the TRCN must also be listed as priorities to streamline their activities and align them with the new approach to teacher development.

## Attracting the best and motivating teachers to teach better

More brilliant students have multiple career options and, more often than not, teaching is not one of them. Apart from the low salaries, limited opportunity for career advancement and general perception of teaching as a 'lowly' profession are major barriers to attracting the right quality of candidates into the classroom. Our teaching reform programme must therefore include a deliberate strategy to attract the right calibre of people into the classrooms. Strategies to consider must include those with potentials to raise the profile of the profession, give financial reward and broaden opportunity for career advancement.

To raise the profile of the teaching profession, we must start with raising the prestige of the teacher training institutions. One way to achieve this is to develop effective mechanism for deliberately selecting applicants into the teacher training colleges and giving incentives, including scholarships, bursaries and guaranteed employment to candidates.

Another important area where Nigeria has been left behind is in the career pathways for teachers. In seeking to attract the best and keeping them on the job, we need to define different pathways for career progression of teachers that is both financially and professionally rewarding, outside the traditional civil service cadre. Government has announced a plan to implement a different framework for paying teachers, the Teacher Salary Scale (TSS). However, a package of incentive that merely seeks to increase teachers' salaries and grants some allowances is not sustainable in the long run, unless such remunerations are also tied to clearly-defined career framework that entrenches professionalisation. Moreover, there is no evidence in the literatures that higher salaries necessarily make teachers better.<sup>38</sup>

A donor-led initiative seeking to introduce this new career path for teachers has been on for a couple of years. It is not clear how much progress has been made on it, but it is worth revisiting. Generally, what the proposed career path for teachers seeks to do is to offer a formal and sustained recognition for teachers throughout their career, which reflects and rewards their experience and competence. Below is an illustration of possible five-stage career pathways that may be adopted; performance criteria as well as advancement process for each level will be specified accordingly:

Table 4: **Career pathway for teachers**

LEVEL FIVE	ADVANCED TEACHER
LEVEL FOUR	MASTER TEACHER
LEVEL THREE	SENIOR TEACHER
LEVEL TWO	PROFESSIONAL TEACHER
ENTRY LEVEL	ASSOCIATE TEACHER

In addition to raising the prestige of teachers, career advancement will also come with significant financial compensation, while offering opportunities for continuing professional development. This will open the way for real professionalism in teaching. It is also important to note that the kind of resistance that has been witnessed in some states over the Teacher Development Needs Assessment (TDNA) would have been bypassed since passing such test would then be incentives-

36 <http://trcn.gov.ng/file/Introducing%20TRCN.pdf>

37 <https://www.thecable.ng/trcn-says-70-of-private-school-teachers-in-southwest-are-unqualified>

38 Pritchett, L (2013). Op. Cit



... package of incentive that merely seeks to increase teachers' salaries and grants some allowances is not sustainable in the long run, unless such remunerations are also tied to clearly-defined career framework that entrenches professionalisation.



driven and would become a necessary process in career progression.

## Monitoring Learning Achievements

Despite the general view that Nigerian education system over-examines children, in reality there is very little evidence of national assessment and no evidence of participation in international learning assessments. National assessments help a country to know if the curriculum's intentions are being attained at various levels. Most countries that routinely carry out these assessments usually administer them in the transition years: end of Primary 3 and end of Primary 6. The key question is what do we expect a child to be able to do at the end of each year of contact with the school curriculum, especially in literacy and numeracy? Assessment at the end of Primary 3 does not only help us to know how much progress children have made before they transit to upper primary, it also gives enough room for remedial interventions. Without such assessments, it would be impossible to know and address the issues of quality generally, or to identify imbalance in learning achievements along gender, regional other demographic classifications.

International assessments on the other hand, help a country to compare the learning achievements of its students with students of other countries on the same grade level in order to obtain a "comparative framework" to evaluate their curriculum and address deficiencies. One of such international learning assessment programme carried out at the primary school level is the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), organised by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA), which also runs the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS). TIMSS tests the proficiency of students across the world at various grade levels "to provide important background information that can be used to improve teaching and learning in mathematics and science"<sup>39</sup>. Since it started in 1995, five Asian countries have consistently dominated the performance league by a distance: Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. So far, only six African countries have participated: South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Botswana, Egypt, and Ghana. South Africa, which has participated longer than other African countries says the assessment would allow South Africa to compare its curricula and achievement in mathematics and science with those in industrial countries<sup>40</sup>. South Africa also participates in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) programme, established in 1995 by 15 countries in the region.

Performance in TIMSS have triggered parliamentary debates in some countries about their educational systems.<sup>41</sup> National and international assessments can indeed form the basis on which policy makers and education planners can take informed decisions on how to improve the quality of education in the country.

## Summary of Recommendations

- For 24 years of its existence, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) has functioned more as a funding agency. The Commission needs to undergo a deep structural review to enable it to take on more responsibilities for improving quality in public schools.
- The UBE Act, 2004, needs to be reviewed to take into account the experience of the last two decades regarding its implementation, and the identified challenges. For example, the provision on counterpart funding and expenditure prescription needs to be reviewed. Spending priorities need to be shifted towards factors that impact most on learning outcomes like textbooks, inspections, teacher recruitment and training.
- The governance of basic education needs to be decentralised to enable schools and local governments to play more active roles in decision-making, especially in resource allocation. Therefore, the Local Universal Basic Education Board (LUBEB) needs to be established. In addition, the School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) should be made a legal requirement for each school so as to mobilise community leaders to play a more active role in the management of their schools.
- Government needs to engage more with the private education providers and actively support them. The cases of Chile and India are indicative of what government could do. One option is for government to undertake to supply textbooks to all registered private schools. This will take away from the cost that parents have had to bear in sending their children to these schools.
- Reform of the colleges of education, and teacher training institutions should be integral to



National assessments help a country to know if the curriculum's intentions are being attained at various levels. Most countries that routinely carry out these assessments usually administer them in the transition years: end of Primary 3 and end of Primary 6



39 [https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/home/pdf/T2015\\_TIMSS.pdf](https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/home/pdf/T2015_TIMSS.pdf)

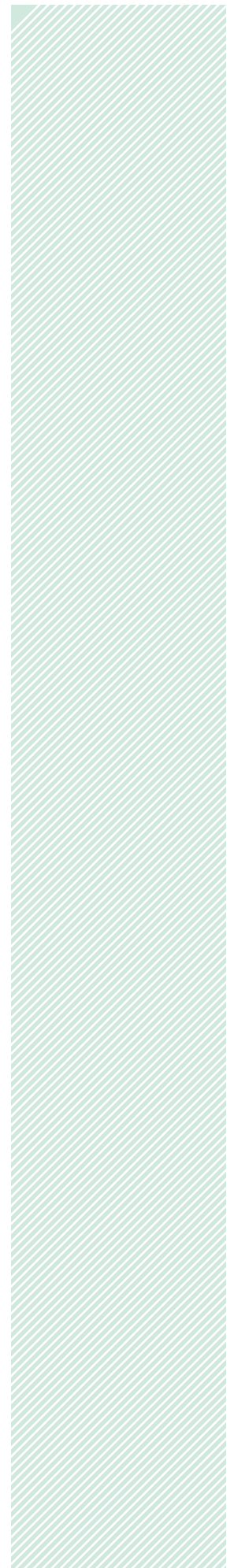
40 Vincent G. and Thomas K. (2008). Op. cit.

41 Vincent G. and Thomas K. (2008) Assessing National Achievement Levels in Education. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank 1818 H Street NW Washington, DC 20433

any effort to improve the quality of teaching and teachers in schools. This reform must raise entry standards and provide incentives, including scholarships, bursaries and guaranteed employment that would attract the right talents into the schools.

- A new career path for teachers needs to be established that will provide the framework for the planned Teachers' Salaries Scale (TSS) and ensure greater professionalisation as well as career progression.
- Agencies and institutions that have responsibility for teachers' training and certification need to be better coordinated to achieve greater efficiency. Colleges of education should provide teacher training up to degree level, while universities should offer post-graduate trainings only. The roles of NTI and the TRCN also need to be streamlined. One of them is surplus to requirement.
- A National Assessment on Progress in Basic Education needs to be insitutionalised to carry out learning outcome assessments in literacy, numeracy and reading at various grade levels across the country, but especially in Primary 3 and Primary 6. This needs to be an independent body that reports to the President.
- Nigeria must ensure participation in international assessments of learning progress. This will not only help to monitor progress towards achieving the SDG 4 and national objectives for UBE, it will also help the country to benchmark its educational systems against those of other countries at the global, regional and sub-regional levels.

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