

Sustainability and Free Education Policy: An Examination of Public Secondary Schools in Ogun State, Nigeria

Oluwatoyin Gbenga Bawalla^{1*}

1. PhD Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Science.

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Abstract

Purpose: The study examined whether education should be free or not among the public secondary school teachers in Ogun State in Nigeria. The study examined the status of the secondary schools in terms of funding available to public secondary schools in Ogun State.

Methodology: The study applied Structural Functionalist theory and adopted qualitative method of data collection. Five (5) Key Informant Interviews (KII) and In-depth Interviews (IDI) were conducted respectively for both the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) and Academic Staff Union of Secondary Schools (ASUSS) union in Ogun State. Result was analysed and transcribed via qualitative content analysis

Findings: Findings revealed that teacher performance was not encouraging due to poor motivating factors; running of free education was more problematic and cumbersome due to inadequate funding by the government.

Conclusion: The study recommended that Government need to abolish the free running of education and if not opt in or re-introduce the Parent Teacher Association (PTA levy) to the public secondary school as this will screen out unserious students who constitutes the student population in various schools across the state.

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* Corresponding author: bawalla.oluwatoyin@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

1. Introduction

The Nigerian school system is increasingly challenged with many complex problems (Ubom, 2001). There is a general outcry that the standards of education are falling and morals flagging, (Akande, 2000). Some blame pupils for this apparent decline in quality of education and moral values. A thoughtful few think that they are due to the nature of change in all directions. Majority blame the teachers for the woes in the schools. They are not as devoted and dedicated to the cause of education as their predecessors. Teachers as a group blame the parents and the children. They also blame government for unattractive condition of service and poor physical facilities in some parts of the educational system and more importantly the situation in Ogun State which running a free education policy.

It is no doubt that the various primary and secondary schools lack supervision and adequate inspection due to funds, (Akinsolu 2004). Besides that, there is also the absence of integrity on the part of some education stakeholder as another major factor responsible on the declining quality of education in the country. Sistus (2008) lamented the dilapidation that characterized the primary and secondary school buildings in all parts of the country. According to the scholar, there are no available chairs for the students to receive lessons. In some places, students sit under mango trees because the school classrooms are no longer conducive for learning; and this is a phenomenon that is common to most public schools where a larger percentage of secondary school students (in comparison with private schools) can be found. Suffice to say that not much should be expected from public schools in terms of quality. This is because the shoddy classrooms with leaking roofs and broken desks and chairs are hardly conducive to learning, Arong and Ogbadu, (2010)

Public secondary schools now witness students' explosion as a result of inadequate buildings. For instance, in some public secondary schools in Ogun state, most especially schools within the urban centers that usually experience overpopulation of students compared to those schools in the rural areas, (Bawalla, 2020). Kobojunkie, (2011) revealed that the situation is not only limited to secondary state schools but virtually all public primary and secondary schools nationwide. He further stated that the country has continued to witness tremendous decline in the academic performance of public schools and this may continue to happen even at a faster rate if government's attitude does not change regarding the management of schools.

It is a truism that the Ogun State have been having series of crisis with the National Union of Teachers which ranges from inadequate infrastructural facilities like laboratory equipment, teaching materials, unfavorable and non-conducive environment for teachers in schools, staff welfare packages and so on. It is to be noted here that, there is an urgent need to immediately find a lasting solution to our various public school's challenges in the country before it gets out of hand and lose its prestige like the public schools we have in the past. It is however pertinent to examine the issue of free education policy and its sustainability ability measures using public secondary schools in Ogun State as a case study.

Objectives of the Study: The objectives of the study are to examine the free education policy and its sustainability ability measures among secondary schools in Ogun State, Nigeria. **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:** The National Policy on Education NPE, (2004) recommends that an ideal classroom should contain 40 pupils and a teacher must be in charge at a time. Although this deviates from the UNESCO's recommendation of teacher-pupil ratio of 1:30, which is believed would make teaching and learning efficient and effective better than a larger class. Despite the variance, the Nigerian experience is far from the NPE's position, as there are classrooms operated in the ratio of 1:90, especially in the state schools. Sofolahan (2000) review of the NPE policy, pointed out that most urban centers violate the teacher/pupil ratio of 1:40 as there are 80 pupils in classroom built for 40 pupils in primary schools and over 60 in classes built for 40 pupils in secondary schools. Sofolahan thus remarked that little meaningful learning and teaching

can take place in such congested classes; and attributed the higher pupil-teacher ratio of 80 and 60 to inadequate funding, insufficient classrooms and short of teacher supply.

Perhaps it should be clearly stated here that Nigeria is the architect of the poor quality of her secondary education. Not only because of the overcrowded classroom which impedes on the quality but because her teachers are not well catered for. Teachers' remunerations are not competitive, as they are paid peanuts and as such only those who have no alternatives are left in the classroom and hence their dismal performances could be responsible for the poor quality of teaching in schools presently which in turn breed poor academic performances of students, (Nwokeoma, 2010). Some teachers do not attend school punctually, especially those in the cities who may have one business or the other. Studies or research has also shown that most teachers posted to rural areas go there at their own convenience, may be once or twice in a week. They already have a "roaster of absenteeism" and hence cover up their professional irregularities (Akanke 2000).

Those who even love to work in the rural areas engage the students in serious farming. As a result, their teaching activities are minimal and the students in their custody are left to their ill-fate as they are exposed to the same examinations with urban students and the private school students (Bawalla 2018). Ultimately, the rural students may be considered doomed. Other facilities that aid learning, such as good library, laboratories, playground, toilet facilities and potable water are also conspicuously absent in the schools (Akanke 2000). This pathetic situation ignites a serious quotation: Should all these be absent and we expect above average success? The issue of logistics may fall into the input and as well as in the "processes" that are used to evaluate the success of any educational endeavour, if Stufflebeam's CIIP Model is anything to go by, public schools (both primary and secondary) not only in Ogun State but in Nigeria as a whole needs funding for survival but government in its own way lack funds to efficiently and effectively run public schools. Hence, it is logical to re-examine how schools have coped prior to the introduction of free education. After series of assessment, it become imperatives that best approach to maintain public schools is by the government introducing PTA levy to students to pay per term.

Theoretical Framework: Structural functionalism is a sociological theory that attempts to explain why society functions the way it does by focusing on the relationships between the various social institutions that makes up society (Schaefer 2004). Structural Functionalism is a theoretical understanding of society that posits social systems are collective means to fill social needs. In order for social life to survive and develop in society, there are a number of activities that need to be carried out to ensure that certain needs are fulfilled. In the structural functionalist model, individuals produce necessary goods and services in various institutions and roles that correlate with the norms of the society (Schaefer 2004). It is a framework that sees society as a complex system whose part work together to promote solidarity and stability.

Applied to this study, the government is expected to play its role in the educational sector; any malfunction of any stakeholders in the educational sectors tends to bring about the collapse of such structure. Going by the status of secondary schools in terms of infrastructures in Nigeria, there is a clear indication that the system is underfunded. The government is expected to fund public schools effectively so as to ensure there are provisions and adequate facilities for students to learn in a favorable and conducive atmosphere to be able to come out in flying color. The public schools are mirage with a lot of dilapidated buildings and structure thus making it difficult to have a robust primary and secondary educational development for the government. In other for the educational sector to survive and develop in the society there is need for each stakeholder in the sector to contribute their input towards the progress of the society. Since parent and guardians are stakeholders, there is need on their part to fill the void left by the government if there is to be any meaningful result to extract from the educational sector.

2. Methodology

The study design was descriptive, using qualitative data; the study was carried out in Ogun State among the officials of Nigeria Union of Teachers Ogun State Chapter (NUT), Academic Staff Union of Secondary Schools, Ogun State Chapter (ASUSS) and some selected retired school principals. The state was chosen as a

result of the tremendous decline in the educational sector which has paved way for poor results of students in terminal classes and also teachers' rift and incessant strikes embarked upon by NUT officials in recent times (Adesulu 2012). The targeted population for this study was limited to both male and female members of Nigeria Union of Teachers Ogun State Chapter (NUT), Academic Staff Union of Secondary Schools, Ogun State Chapter (ASUSS) as well as some selected retired school principals across the three senatorial districts of Ogun State. Two qualitative methods of data collection were utilised in this study, namely KIIs for (5) unions' officials and IDIs were designed for the (5) retired school principals. The KIIs involved face-to-face interactions between the researcher and participants with pre-determined structured and unstructured questions. The interactions were recorded with the aid of tape recorder. The IDIs gave room for flexibility and provided the opportunity to probe deeper on some key aspects about education and sustainability measures. The participants were purposively selected and based on principle of Confidentiality of data, Beneficence to participants, non-Maleficence to participants and Voluntariness.

The recorded interviews and discussion were transcribed for analysis. The transcription was compared with the notes taken during the interactive session. The content and thematic analytical method of identifying and bringing out the similar thoughts or distinct opinions were expressed across the two methods adopted. This was done in line with focus of the study which is via detailed analysis of public secondary schools in Ogun State. Information obtained was reported as phrases in quotes from the recorded expressions of the participants. Internal validity was achieved by using data from all the two sources and presenting responses from different participants to supports the main theme of this study.

3. Findings

Free Education and Rating of Public Secondary School Teachers: The study attempted to obtain union views about the performance, ratings and assessment of teachers in Ogun State Public secondary schools. Responses from the KII's expatiate on government not been able to reward or motivate teachers adequately, government free education policy and lack of infrastructural facilities as presented in the responses were transcribed below:

...People do say that teachers performance are poor but the issue is that there are lot of factors responsible for this, government itself should make teachers happy, encourage and motivate teachers by rewarding adequately, there should be evaluation of students performance (external assessment), coaching at home for students after school hours by their parents, parents are the one insisting that their wards should be promoted at all cost, when this happens what do you expect in student terminal classes when is about to write NECO/WASSC (KII, Female NUT Officials, 2019)

In another way, a participant describes the performance of secondary school teachers as this;

...Some teachers are responsible for the mess and rot in educational sector. The government also aid teachers for not performing effectively, for instance, look at the educational sector in our state, the running free of education by government makes it more problematic and cumbersome, for instance, we witness explosion of students in our various secondary schools, there are two sets of students in our school now, one set are students that are fully ready to read, learn and cooperate with teachers in line with educational training and listen to teachers instruction but at the same time because of the free education, we have larger percentage of students who are only coming to schools because of certificate. Go to our schools these days, we have mothers and fathers their as students. The standard of education is not falling it is the performance of students that are diminishing as a result of running free education which paved way for unserious students to come to school. (KII, Female ASSUSS Officials, 2019)

Another participant further justified the above foregoing on the assessment of teachers in public secondary schools in the state,

...The UNESCO subscribes that student ratio in the primary school is a teacher to 35 students and in secondary school a teacher to 40 students. Because our government is running free education, we are

witnessing a teacher to 150 students in our secondary schools, what meaningful academic studies students will get. There can't be effective teaching in that atmosphere, these also limit or lessens the performance of teachers in our public school. (IDI, Female Retired Principal, 2019)

Inquiry to the Woeful Performance of Students due to free education: Inquiry into the reasons for students' consistent woeful performance in West African Examination Council, questions were asked on the 30% promotional exercise for the students in public secondary school in Ogun State, the participants described the situation thus:

...In one of the free education policy, students can no longer repeat class because they are not paying, if a student should repeat any class is an extra burden on the government, aside that we are now having hundred percent transitions from primary to secondary school now. This is not supposed to be so, is not compulsory that all students should be educated, that is why we have technical government colleges. Even from junior secondary school to senior secondary school are also hundred percent transitions. Even those students that are not interested in reading and writing, you compulsorily promote them to senior class and yet you say there are mass failures, why won't there be. The state policy on promotion state that no students should repeat, all students should be promoted except when some parent now say they want their wards to repeat the class. If we decide to you what was in existence in the 80 and 90s of 5 credits with English and mathematics, more than half of the class will repeat and the government policy will query you why you have repeat them. (KII, Male ASUSS Officials, 2019)

Similarly other participants opined that:

...It is bad policy, using 30% to promote students hinders the quality of student and this definitely has an adverse effect on the students when they get to the terminal class of SS3, and outcome of this is what we are witnessing now when WAEC release students result. The policy is as a result of the free education that the state government is running. The standard of education in the state is falling and the state isn't measuring up to standards. The 30% promotional exercise been used on our secondary school in the state, will affect our student in future and by extension the state and the nations at large will be affected, my advice for the government is to immediately review the policy on promotion in the state. The government should realize that everything in the state cannot be totally free. (KII, Female NUT Officials, 2019)

...We the principal condemned the promotional policy then but what could we have done, we are just public servants, our voice is not heard. Our government knows the right thing to do, during their own time education was a serious business then and they are very serious about their education, they didn't experience this bad policy on promotion then, how come they are damaging the future of this young generation by using 30% promotion. Everybody will not succeed through a formal education. (IDI, Female Retired Principal, 2019)

As regards the position of the unions officials why they oblige to the 30% for promotion of students in Ogun State public secondary schools knowing fully that teachers are always at the receiving end for any woeful performance of students in terminal classes of SS 3, a male participants responded thus:

...You have forgotten the fact that he who pays for the pipe dictate the tune. It is government that is paying teachers' salary, we only advise and cannot force them. We are not keeping mute, we continue to write memo and disturbing them, if we have our own way, enough of all these free educations, the principals and vice principals are all handicapped and cannot do anything. I want to tell you confidentially, for the past six terms, schools have not be giving running cost and we are saying no students should pay for any PTA levy, how do you intend to curb examination malpractices when government refuses to pay running cost, where will a principal get money to buy chalk, registers and diary for students and no principal dear not send any students out of school because government is claiming to be running free education. That is why you see most parents withdrawing their wards away from public secondary schools and putting them in private school, is simply because of the decadence in our public secondary school. Policies supposed to be formulated in tandem to the reality of what is on ground. (IDI, Male ASUSS Officials, 2019)

Sustainability of free Education Policy: The Participants were asked about the sustainability of free education policy as it affects the performance of students in WASSCE in recent years, the response was:

...Society and some stakeholders are blaming teachers; teachers are not to be blamed here, it's all government various policies on education, we talked earlier on 30% promotional exercise for students to move to the next class because of free education, a lot of factors is attributed to this, parents doesn't care any longer more, they assumed government had already taken care of their wards at the secondary school, whereas is not like, Gods knows since the time the government gave school principal running cost for secondary schools, where will school principal get money to buy chalk or maker to write for students on the board, school register is also there, stationeries for running school and other sundry expenses. Also couple with the facts that governments are owing teachers. With all these, the performance of students will definitely fall. The truth of the matter is, government cannot sustain the free education policy, and there should be introduction of tuition fees to public secondary schools. We are only deceiving ourselves on free education policy, as long as there is still policy in existence, we should experience more poor results. (KII, Male ASUSS Officials, 2019)

Another participant, speak thus:

...No doubt a lot of factors are responsible for the poor performance of students in the terminal classes, the government should first and foremost abolish the free education as government cannot sustain it and also the frequent changes in school curriculum in recent times as well as well lackadaisical approach of students, government and we teachers also. Let me tell you, aside that we are short of teachers in public secondary schools, we also have unqualified teachers and those that call themselves teachers but have no passion for teaching, also these are indicator of students to perform woeful in WASSCE. (KII, Male NUT, 2019)

...Let me tell you, teaching is the best profession in the world, in developed country teaching is a noble profession and is because education is not free, education is for serious minded and committed students not like Tom, Dick and Harry that we have in our various secondary school. Most students in the rural areas after close of school leave for their artisan place of work and this is also now more rampant even in the urban centers. (IDI, Male Retired Principal, 2019)

...Most public secondary schools result is woeful, that is why parent these days prefer private secondary to public schools, and most public schools are doing great when compared with the public schools in terms assessment of WASSCE. (IDI, Female Retired Principal, 2019)

Improvement on Teachers Welfare: On the issue of rewards of public secondary school teachers in the state, participants from the union representatives advised that it could be improved and developed upon only if the governments do the needful. Their words:

...Only when government realized that Teachers need to be rewarded, just like their counterpart in other profession like doctors, nurses, pharmacist and engineers. Teachers also want to give the best education to their children; they also need to be rewarded as related to other profession. No other alternative route than to motivate teachers effectively. Increasing teachers' allowance in rural areas is a necessity for actualization of good performance from the students, they will have interest to stay in rural areas, and the urban centers will be decongested. The 27.5% teachers peculiar allowance signed in 2008 with the state government must be paid to all teachers, nurses are been paid for shift allowances, doctors are paid for call duty allowance, journalists are paid dressing allowance, what will you use to distinguish teaching as a profession, it is teachers' peculiar allowance. Government needs to find a means to compensate ...and motivate teachers (KII, Female ASUSS Officials, 2019)

...Yes, it can be improved upon, provided when a retired school teacher/principal with vast knowledge and experience in the public secondary schools are allowed to steer the leadership in both Ministry of Education and Teaching Service Commission, not what we have now, in the last dispensation, imagine a Barrister was in charge of Ministry of Education and Science and Technology, where do we go from there, how do you set out a good policy on education, talk less of proper monitoring and implementation.

Government needs to go by putting a round peg in a round hole and not a round peg in a square role. (IDI, Male Retired Principal, 2019).

4. Discussion

Ogun state continues to experience financial constraints to effectively run the free education policy as a result of the fact that the state public secondary school had extremely large class size which is against the required standard. It is noteworthy that the National Policy on Education NPE (2006) recommends that an ideal classroom should contain 40 pupils to a teacher, although this deviates from the UNESCO's recommendation of teacher-pupil ratio of 1:30, which is believed would make teaching and learning efficient and effective better than a larger class. Unfortunately, as there are classrooms operated in ratio 1:150 as revealed by the union officials, while Sofolahan (2000) was reviewing the NPE, he pointed out that most urban centers violate the teacher/pupil ratio of 1:40 as there are 80 pupils in classroom built for 40 pupils in primary schools and over 60 in classes built for 40 pupils in secondary schools. Sofolahan thus remarked that little meaningful learning and teaching can take place in such congested classes; and attributed the higher pupil-teacher ratio of 80 and 60 to inadequate funding, insufficient classrooms and short of teacher supply.

The study also established that with running of free education, it paved way for destruction of most students when using 30% for promotion of students, has this had successfully made students perform woefully in WASSCE, this justified Ogunlade's (2011) views that the rate at which students failed in the terminal class speaks volume and had generated a lot of controversy among the stakeholders in the education sector. The government change in policy of education without the consultation of schools teachers and principals in matter relating to students and also not putting sufficient logistics in place, politicking of the business of education, mismanagement of resources by education commissions, poor attitude of students to learning, poverty on the parts of parents of secondary school students and attitude of the society to education, to mention but few as reviewed by Ojedokun and Aladejana (2012) also showed there is need for government to take a second look on it policy on education and promotional exercise by carrying along the union officials in governance of education in the state. The Parent Teachers Association in (2013) had argued that the level of education in the state had declined tremendously in the last fifteen years, unlike in the eighties and nineties when the state was known to be excellent for academic performances in West Africa School Certificate Examinations. This no doubt accounts for the number of private secondary schools which has continued to increase astronomically.

The study revealed that the union sees teaching as a noble profession and a special calling, the union are of the opinion teachers needs to also be on a special salary structure like their counterpart in other profession like nurses, lecturers etc. Rewards goes a long way in any organisation, and it also helps to build and increase employees' commitment to work. According to Bawalla, (2020) in a study about rewards and job performance argued that rewards are economic gains one secures or get from a job, and include things like salaries, job bonuses and fringe benefits, in so doing there is need for the government or the employer to do the needful in terms of improving and developing on the rewarding teachers adequately which in turn brings about students' good performance of academic work. Cole, (1997) had emphases that provision of stable monetary rewards contributes to employees' commitment, high job performance and stability on the job. Armstrong (2001) identifies that monetary rewards have a powerful effect on freedom from worry, fear and contamination by the organization environment. If fair monetary rewards are adjusted to employees and their basic needs are accessible, their levels of commitment will raise. In addition to the fore going on good rewards for teachers, Adegbite, Bawalla and Adedeji (2020) asserts that there is need for management to look at ways in which workers well-being contributes to performance and productivity of employees and concludes that workers with higher happiness may perform better and contribute more to firm growth than those with lower happiness. On the reports of students' performance in West African Examination Council Examination (WASSCE) in the last few years in Nigeria as reported in the media are not encouraging. Each year comes with a gradual decline and this is worrisome. This trend has been largely attributed to lack of job commitment

among the classroom teachers, which in most cases cumulated into teachers late coming to work, absenteeism, redundancy at work, indiscipline among students (Hakeem, 2012). Also the dissatisfaction between union and employers in which unions most times engaged in industrial dispute, conflicts and strikes affect teachers' morale and disinterest among public secondary schools in Ogun state (Bawalla and Daniel, 2021).

Drawing from the ideas of study, I came into conclusion that the government finds it very difficult to sustain the free education policy as it is evident from the participant's point of views. The unions are of the opinion that teaching is a noble profession in which teachers needs to be recognized in the society. The main duty of the union is to better the educational system in the state and government should take a second look at the free education policy which attracted unserious students that has no business with education. The unions also revealed the government needs to comply with the UNESCO policy on teacher to student classroom ratio policy. Government should abolish the free running of education and if not opt in or re-introduced the Parent Teacher Association (PTA levy) to the public secondary school as this will be a criteria or perhaps screen out unserious students who constitutes the student population in various schools across the state. It is to be noted that the free education by the government is somehow problematic and cumbersome for teachers as schools witness explosion of students in classes, some set of students are not ready to learn or read, as they are only for the school certificate to become either Chairman of Motorcycle Riders or councilors in their locality or wards.

This research is not intending to apportion blame on any of these stakeholders in the educational sector but rather lay much emphasis on the reality on ground that the government might need to consider by introducing a tuition fee to our public secondary schools, so as to enable infrastructural development in the secondary schools such as good and conducive classrooms, laboratories, libraries, playground, sick-bay, furniture etc which are seen as the major indicators that determine the success or failure of secondary education.

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