REFORMS IN THE NIGERIAN 9-YEAR BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULUM: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL-BASED ASSESSMENT

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*ABSTRACT*

Nigeria adopted a free, compulsory and continuous 9-year Universal Basic Education programme (UBE) in 2004 in order to meet the ideals of the EFA goals and the MDG’s. The then existing primary and junior secondary school curricula were restructured into a 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC). BEC included new subject matter in Science, Technology, Mathematics, National Values, Cultural and Creative Arts, ICT as well as foundations in Vocational Studies and Entrepreneurship among others. BEC was implemented systematically in year 1 of the primary and junior secondary schools respectively beginning from September 2008. After three years of the first cycle of implementation BEC has been further reviewed to reduce the overload while incorporating emerging issues and maintaining quality. The revised BEC is planned to take off in year 1 of the primary and junior secondary schools beginning from September 2012 while the old BEC will be systematically phased out. This paper discusses the content standards and structure of the revised BEC and their implications for school-based-assessment in Nigeria and developing economies.

**REFORMS IN THE NIGERIAN 9-YEAR BASIC EDUCATION CURRICULUM: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL-BASED ASSESSMENT**

Nigeria embraced a new democratic dispensation and consequently embarked on a series of social and economic reforms in 1999. Specifically the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), a home-grown socio-economic reform blue-print was adopted in 2004 (FGN, 2004) in line with the global socio-economic reforms. The four focal areas of NEEDS are: value re-orientation, wealth creation, employment generation and poverty eradication. Education is expected to play some critical roles in the actualization of the ideals of NEEDS as the document provides that education is to be used to empower the people. Education was also being reformed in order to achieve this goal (FME, 2009; FME, 2010; Obioma, 2010a, 2010b).

In keeping with the policy of social and economic reforms the present Nigerian political leadership adopted a Transformation Agenda in 2011 whose strategic goals include among others:

* + - Good governance;
    - Infrastructural development;
    - Sustainable power and energy; and
    - Human development

Again education is expected to play some critical roles in ***human development.*** Thus, the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education developed (FME, 2012) a 4-Year Strategic Plan for the Development of the Education Sector (2011-2015) which will facilitate the attainment of the ideals of the Transformation Agenda in the education sector. ***Standards and Quality Assurance*** which incorporates **school curriculum reforms** at all levels of the education system in Nigeria is one of the **six priority areas** of the 4-year Strategic Plan.

School Curriculum reforms at the basic education level (6 years of primary education and 3 years of junior secondary education) in Nigeria have been geared towards the acquisition of functional numeracy and literacy competences and skills, laying the foundation of vocational and entrepreneurship skills and preparation for senior secondary education (NERDC, 2006; NERDC, 2007). Nigeria adopted the free and compulsory 9-year Universal Basic Education Programme (UBE) from 2004 in order to meet the goals of Education For All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s) as well as the ideals of NEEDS. Thus, learners are to have continuous schooling for nine years after which they are expected to sit the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE).

The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) as part of its statutory responsibilities restructured the then existing primary school and junior secondary school curricula into a 9-year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) in line with the UBE. The BEC which became operational in 2008 beginning from year 1 of primary school and year 1 of junior secondary school was therefore developed to facilitate the implementation of the UBE. By this arrangement the old primary and junior secondary school curricula were to be systematically phased out in two cycles; primary school in 2014 and junior secondary school in 2011.

The curriculum reform shows the introduction of core and compulsory subjects such as Basic Science, Basic Technology, IT, Civic Education, Social Studies, Religious Studies (Christian and Islamic), Local Language, Cultural and Creative Arts, French besides English Studies and Mathematics. Altogether there are 20 subjects in the curriculum structure from which learners are to study 14-15 subjects**.** The first batch of learners graduated after three years of junior secondary education in June 2011.

After three years of trial implementation, end-users have raised the issue of subject overload and the need to further revise the BEC to accommodate some emerging issues. Thus BEC has now been revised to achieve the following:

* Reduction of the subject overload without compromising quality in line with the global best practices;
* Elimination of subject matter overlap, repetitions and redundancies
* Improvement of the quality of BEC by infusing some emerging issues such as reading culture, drug and food safety education, security awareness, disaster risk management education, consumer protection rights amongst others;

In the revised BEC learners are to study 7-10 subjects. These subjects are; English Studies, Mathematics, Basic Science and Technology, Pre-Vocational Studies, 1 local language, French (from primary 4), Religion and National Values, Cultural and Creative Arts, Business Studies (from JSS 1) and Arabic (optional). Specifically:

* Basic Science and Technology incorporates: Basic Science, Basic Technology, Physical and Health Education (PHE) and Information Technology (IT);
* Pre-Vocational studies incorporates: Home Economics, Agriculture (these subjects were taken as electives from the old BEC) and Entrepreneurship ;
* Religion and National Values Education includes:- Christian Religious Studies, Islamic Studies, Social Studies, Civic Education and Security Education such that the teaching of Religion form the basis of imbibing national values, probity and positive character, besides the learning of the basic tenets of the religion;

It is planned that the revised BEC will commence in primary 1 and JSS 1 from September 2012 while the old BEC will be gradually and systematically phased out.

**Implications of the revised BEC for School-Based Assessment**

Curriculum reforms have given rise to reforms in assessments (Yu et al, 2006; O’Donnel, 2004). Therefore as school curricula are being reformed in Nigeria, there is need for school teachers to be equipped with assessment skills that will bring about effective delivery of the new curriculum subject matter. This should also be lessons gained for developing communities especially African countries currently engaged in school curriculum reforms.

Specifically for the Nigerian situation NERDC has embarked on developing Teachers Guides for each revised subject curriculum and which incorporates fundamental elements of assessment, linking assessments to instructional objectives and teaching resources. Capacity enhancement workshops are also being run for school teachers on the use of these Teachers Guides.

The revised BEC shows two basic scenarios in curriculum structuring in Nigeria namely, the single-subject curriculum and the compound-subject curriculum. The single-subject curriculum in the context of this presentation is that which reflects only one stand-alone subject eg English Studies and Mathematics. The compound-subject curriculum on the other hand is that which reflects a combination of two or more previously stand-alone subjects. The major challenge is how to deal with school-based-assessments of the compound-subject curriculum such as Basic Science and Technology, Religion and National Values and Pre-Vocational Studies. It will be recalled that in the revised curriculum structure, these compound-subject curriculum incorporates themes that used to be treated as stand-alone subjects. For instance Basic Science and Technology has the following major themes; Basic Science, Basic Technology, IT and PHE. The question is ‘Should a single score be returned on this compound-subject as an indicator of learner’s performance?’ This may give rise to spurious interpretation of how learners have performed. It is proposed that scores be returned for each theme which will reflect learners profile performance and proper interpretation of learners’ achievement. This should be similarly applied to other compound-subject curriculum.

As school curriculum is undergoing reforms, there is need for similar reforms in pedagogical contexts at the pre-service teacher education level especially as they affect assessment practices. This should also be infused into capacity building workshops designed for serving teachers. Development of teacher-made-test items, their use and interpretations of the resulting test scores are basic skills that pre-service teachers should also acquire. Pre-service teachers should also be assisted to understand the curriculum review process that gives rise to curriculum restructuring. In this way the teachers (pre-service and serving teachers) will be better equipped to link assessment requirements to new content matter and specific objectives.

In conclusion the implications of school curriculum reforms for school-based-assessment will affect both the curriculum content mastery and ability to carry out school-based assessment that would meet the needs of the basic education system in terms of the inputs, processes, outcomes and control measures in teaching and learning activities. School-based-assessment practices should be made to respond to school curriculum reforms. Curriculum workers should collaborate assessment professionals to achieve this target.

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