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**A FOCUS ON "POLICY RESEARCH" ,
FOR
QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Like any other aspect of human endeavour the educational system is prone to changes from time to time. There is therefore the need to concretely base these changes on facts and figures especially where these changes are pre-planned and will largely affect peoples' hopes, dreams, aspirations, careers and entire lives. The use of the principles of policy research can achieve this aim. Unfortunately, this paper acknowledges the lack of or limited use of policy research in our educational system. This article therefore emphasizes the need and calls for the use of scientific research procedures in conducting policy researches which are meant to give empirical backing to educational policies enacted in our country.

INTRODUCTION

The educational system is dynamic. It is subject to changes over time. To improve upon a system there is often the need to amend, completely change or create new policies as this will introduce a new perspective or value in to the system. This situation is also found in the education process. In the Nigerian context, there have been various regimes that have influenced and affected the educational system through different policy formulations. One then stops to ask, to what extent do the various regimes and their agencies substantiate or base the change in our educational policies on empirical evidence?

STEPS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Research has been defined by Best and Kahn (1989) as "the systematic and objective analysis and recording of controlled observation that may lead to the development of generalization principles or theories, resulting in prediction and possibly the ultimate control of events". Simply put, Osuala (1987) considers research as the process of arriving at dependable solutions to the problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data.

Like all scientific research works, educational research follows the normal steps which include: -

- recognition of the problem
- definition of the problem in specific terms
- development of hypotheses
- development of techniques and measuring instruments that will provide objective data relevant to the hypotheses
- collection of data
- analysis of data
- drawing conclusions relative to the hypothesis based on the data. (Gall, 1979)

An aspect of educational research, evaluation research to be specific has as its focus the gathering of information in the form of data that will aid the decision making process in the educational system (Okpala, Onocha and Oyedeje, 1993). Decisions are taken in relevant area in order to improve and also give a sense of direction to the educational system. Information is therefore needed from the various facets of education, such as adequate teaching methods, appropriate textbooks, efficiency and effectiveness of teachers and the desirability and the adequacy of educational programmes and the like. The pieces of information are meant to be the basis for making policies for the country's educational system. The purpose of this article then, is consider the relationship between evaluative inquiry and the present decision structure, and also to emphasis the need for evaluative research in the policy making process of our educational system.

POLICY RESEARCH

Research meant to affect policy decisions are known to differ from ordinary research designed to advance knowledge in a particular discipline. According to Coleman (1972) a "disciplinary research" is also a conclusion – oriented research while a "policy research" is more or less a decision – oriented research. Coleman (1972) highlighted the main characteristics of policy research. One is that the research emanates from the world of action. This means that the focus of the research is always at the situation in the field. Secondly, the result from such research endeavour is meant to be practically implemented in the field.

PRINCIPLES OF POLICY RESEARCH

On the basis of the above characteristics, Coleman (1972) identified ten principles, which should govern policy research. He indicated that for policy research:

- i) The correctness of the predictions or results of the research is of utmost importance.
- ii) Make available all relevant information at the time that action is to be taken. This is better than having complete information after that time.
- iii) The ultimate product of policy research is the modification of a social policy by its results.
- iv) It is necessary to treat differently policy variables from situational variables because policy variables are subject to policy manipulations.
- v) A research problem picked from a work situation should not lose its meaning in the course of the research.
- vi) The existence of competing or conflicting interests, together with the time-coupling of research to policy, require special self corrective devices, such as the commissioning of more than one research group, under the auspices of different interested parties, and independent review of research results
- vii) There is the need to merge the values of a scientific research method with the values from the field (actual situation report). This has to govern the formulation of policy research problems.
- viii) The level of use of the research results in the field is determined by the acceptance of the policy research problems.
- ix) The results should be openly published, as these will heighten the possibility of its being used.
- x) The formulation of the research problem, the communication and use of the research results in the field, and making policy recommendations based on research results, should be governed by the investigator's perception of societal needs.

So far the out-standing problem is the need to develop an understanding of the relationship between policy research and policy formulation. There is also the need to fashion out policy research models, which can be used in our type of political system.

The major objective of policy research studies is to contribute to the improvement of practices that take place in the classrooms, among peer groups and at home. More so, these research works are likely to enhance the study of students' characteristics and their application and implications to their immediate environment. Policy research studies therefore answer such questions as: what is the value of individualized education; why is the study of Introductory Technology made compulsory in Junior Secondary Schools; what advantage has the six year education programme over the former five year programme? Policy research is therefore geared towards addressing similar and related questions to those asked above.

THE NEED FOR POLICY RESEARCH IN NIGERIA

Policy research is a research whose results and outcomes are to be used as basis for the amendment and /or formulation of policies needed to improve the standard of education in the country. In Nigeria, the educational system has undergone so many changes in the areas of school calendar (from the January – December to the September – June schedule); the school programme (from grammar, commercial and technical school classification to comprehensive education then to the junior and senior secondary school programme classification). Substantial changes have also been witnessed in the textbooks used within very short periods especially in core subject like English Language.

Although the educational system is dynamic, this does not call for the indiscriminate fluctuations in methods of teaching and the curriculum content. For example there has been a change from a five-year Secondary school programme to that of six years. According to Ikeobi (1986) the Senior Secondary School Science Curriculum for the five year programme has been increased with the inclusion of 25% of the former "A" level course content to make the curriculum for the six year programme. The question is to what extent has these changes been based on empirical studies?

It is common knowledge that in Nigeria most of these changes are done at the spur of the moment with limited or inadequate considerations and consultations, with the people these policies will directly affect, primarily, the students and teachers. The case that readily comes to mind is the change in the school calendar in 1974 from January – December Calendar to the September – June Schedule. This was further changed in 1989 back to the January – December arrangement. But in 1992 it was again reversed to the September – June Calendar. There is no gain saying that, these fluctuations have adverse effect on the performance of students and on the general health of the school system. For instance, by the 1974 change, students were made to go through a class in only six months, while during the 1989 rescheduling students affected had to spend a period longer than one academic year in a class. The effect of the last and the most recent changes in the school calendar is still palpable in our educational system years after its implementation.

Another hastily introduced policy was the teaching of Introductory Technology in our Junior Secondary Schools. Even though it was a lofty idea but its implementation was plagued by initial lack of equipment and when the equipment eventually arrived the programme was studded by insufficient manpower. It is common knowledge today that most of the machines have not as much as come out of their original casing, yet millions of naira had been spent to procure them. This enormous waste would have been averted if a pilot study were conducted to identify areas of possible problems and remedies established before embarking on this project nation wide.

Even though the nation over the years has gone into unsuccessful innovative education endeavours the introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) without adequate preparation seems to give the impression that our policy makers have not learnt from their previous experiences. UBE has been launched in most states of the Federalism but the state of readiness for the actual

implementation is yet to be obvious. September 2000 is the start date for this project, with the expected sudden increase in intake one wonders the state of readiness of the system to absorb this stock in terms of manpower availability, classroom accommodation, and other relevant facilities. Except a remedial scheme is put in place the possibility of the UBE following the already observed trend of failure is inevitable

These are among the various and varied case of indiscriminate change in our school system, which time and space in this article, will fail if all must be mentioned. One is then forced to ask; is Policy research used in the Nigerian System of Education at all? The obvious answer is, No.

The need to use research result to back up policy implementation cannot be over emphasized. As Nigerians and educators, we are not unaware of the menace of these indiscriminate changes in our system. The decision to use or implement a new policy or revise an existing one should be supported by definite conclusions draw from research results. This process may only be conducted with the use of a few schools for a pilot study.

During the conduct of the studies the experiences of the students, teachers, parents, administrators and policy makers must be monitored and documented correctly and objectively. Systematic measurement procedure should be selected and adhered to. Communication, participation and clarification among participants in the project should be adequately handled in order that correct information and results are ensured. There is also the need to commission an appropriate, efficient and qualified team to conduct the study, as this will ensure credibility, validity and the reliability of the result.

The big questions that remain are: who should be supporting this kind of research, and how can its results become part of the decision process? In our kind of system of education, the most critical political unit in the nation's school system is the Federal and States Ministries Education. These arms of government are directly responsible for making and implementing the policies of government on education. They are also responsible for the financing and the day to day monitoring of the schools and other educational concerns. In addition to these the National Educational Research Council has as its major responsibility organizing and conducting educational research. Where these government agencies perform their assigned roles, the writer then calls for more concerted effort towards the use of research results as basis for the different policies made for the school system. This procedure if adopted will help curtail the to and fro movement in our policies and thereby by reduce its attendant inconveniences and problems.

CONCLUSION

Changes are inevitable, but the need to base these changes on concrete facts and not just on mere reason or selfish motives is the issues stressed by this article. Education is a vital aspect of humane existence, thus it is not ethical to have its policies tossed and jumbled up at will by individuals who at times are very ill equipped to take these decisions. There is then the need to base all major educational changes and policies on definite research findings as this will help stabilize our system of education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The National Educational Research Council should be well financed and equipped for it to carry out its legitimate functions.
- The National Educational Research Council should work in conjunction with other research institutes and relevant units in Nigerian Universities in order to collate, review and possibly use result of already conducted studies.

- Seminars, Workshops and other training facilities should be made available to research personnel.
- All government funded research projects whose results have been submitted should be reviewed and used.
- For very vast studies assistance could be sought from International Agencies like UNICEF and UNO.

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