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EDUCATIONAL PLANNING IN NIGERIA: FROM PRE-COLONIAL TO POST-COLONIAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the historical evolution of educational planning in Nigeria from pre-colonial to the post-colonial era. Pre-colonial educational planning was community-based and culturally grounded relying on indigenous and Islamic systems that emphasized moral instruction, skills training and social integration but lacked formal documentation and scalability. The colonial era introduced ordinances, inspection systems, grant-in-aid structures and curriculum reforms though these were largely Eurocentric and poorly aligned with local development need. Post-colonial Nigeria adopted more systemic and development-oriented planning through regional Universal Primary Education schemes, national development plans, the Ashby Commission and successive National Policies on Education aimed at expanding access and improving quality. Despite progress, challenges such as funding instability, policy discontinuity, weak data systems and curriculum-labour market mismatch persist. It was concluded that proper educational planning in Nigeria needs consistency in the design and execution of policies, a stable governance over a long period, use of sound data to make decisions and an alignment of national development priorities with the educational objectives

Keywords: Educational planning, indigenous education, Islamic education, colonial education policies, post-colonial reforms

Introduction

Education has always played a central role in the societal, economic and political growth of human society. Long before the advent of the western education, the Nigerian societies were governed by highly organized indigenous and Islamic education systems that were purposely created to transfer cultural values, vocational competencies, moral discourses, and community duties between successive generations. These systems indicate the ancient systems of educational planning in Nigeria, which were based on cultural continuity, and practical acquisition of skills as well as community survival (Fafunwa, 1974). The coming of the western education introduced new forms of planning like school ordinance, curriculum reform, policies of teacher training and grant-in-aid system during the colonial period which diverted the course of education to literacy, administration and missionary goals.

These colonial interventions also provided the basis of modern-day educational planning in Nigeria, although in most occasions not in tandem with the local demands. After gaining independence in

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1960, Nigeria was plunged into another stage of educational planning that has seen national efforts be deliberate to increase access, gain skilled manpower and reorganize the education system. Other projects like regional Universal Primary Education projects, Ashby Commission Report (1959) and the National Policy on Education (1977) influenced the priorities in planning post-colonial education and laid down the frameworks that still affect the direction of educational processes in the country. This paper thus discusses educational planning in Nigeria within three significant periods of history; the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era.

Conceptual Framework

Planning constitutes a fundamental process applicable across all spheres of human endeavor, from individual goal-setting to national development strategies. Dror (1963) conceptualized planning as the systematic preparation of decisions for future action directed toward achieving specified goals through optimal means. Planning functions as an instrument for economic strategy implementation, enabling optimal utilization of national resources and maximum satisfaction of social needs. Nwankwo (1981) characterized planning as activity concerned with developing short-range or long-range guides that optimally utilize available resources to achieve specified objectives. However, planning involves deciding on future actions with the judicious use of available resources to achieve desired goals and objectives.

Educational planning extends general planning principles to the specific context of educational development, addressing fundamental questions regarding human resource development, skill formation, and alignment with national development objectives. Coombs (1970) conceptualized it as the application of rational, systematic analysis to educational development processes, aimed at enhancing educational effectiveness and efficiency in responding to student and societal needs. Nwankwo (1981) defined educational planning as the process of preparing decisions about educational enterprises such that educational goals and purposes will be sufficiently realized in the future with available resources. Hence, educational planning involves making set of decisions for actions in education at any level by utilizing the available human, material, financial, and time resource with a view of achieving educational goals and objectives.

Adesina (1981) identified four fundamental characteristics of educational planning. First, the primacy of planning which recognizes it as the initial management stage, superseding all other managerial functions. Second, planning pervasiveness indicates its application across all management levels and integration with other managerial functions including organization, staffing, and implementation. Third, mission-oriented planning which emphasizes goal-directed activity designed to fulfill human aspirations and achieve specified objectives. Fourth, future-oriented planning which involves making present decisions about future actions, considering historical trends and current experiences to project future developments across short-term (up to 3 years), medium-

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term (3-5 years), or long-term (beyond 5 years) planning horizons.

During the pre-colonial era, planning was informal, community-based as well as culturally oriented. This was followed by formal policy instruments such as ordinances, grants-in-aid, and inspection system, which were introduced by colonial planning. National policies and development plans enabled post-colonial educational planning to be more central and consistent with the national development objectives. The knowledge of these conceptual foundation would help to better analyse the changing philosophies of planning through the different periods of history.

Pre-Colonial Era Educational Planning in Nigeria

The Education Planning in Nigeria before colonization was of two major systems, the Indigenous Education system that was practiced by all the ethnic groups and Islamic Education that had evolved in the northern region since the eleventh century. Whereas both systems lacked a written policy document, both systems exhibited definite and deliberate planning frameworks in regard to the societal needs. Prior to European colonization, Nigeria possessed well-established indigenous education systems deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and economic fabric of diverse ethnic communities. Unlike formal, institutionalized systems introduced during colonization, pre-colonial education operated primarily through informal, community-based mechanisms functionally oriented toward preparing individuals for productive societal roles. Indigenous education emphasized practical skill development, moral value transmission, cultural preservation, and social cohesion maintenance (Fafunwa, 1974).

Education was not confined to specific institutions but integrated into daily life activities, encompassing domestic settings, community gatherings, religious ceremonies, and occupational apprenticeships (Adeyinka, 1971). The primary objective centered on developing well-rounded individuals capable of meaningful contributions to family and community welfare while preserving cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems. This holistic approach ensured that education remained relevant to community needs and responsive to local contexts. Indigenous education involved planning, which was incorporated in the social structures; the elders decided what they would be taught according to the community occupation, the responsibilities of the age grade and the continuity of the cultures.

Islamic education represented a significant pre-colonial educational component, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Islam's introduction from the 11th century onward brought formal religious and literary education that coexisted with traditional indigenous practices (Hogben, 1967). Islamic education centered around Quranic schools (*Tsangaya* or *Makarantar Allo* in Hausa), where children learned Quranic reading and memorization in Arabic. This system produced scholars versed in Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic language, theology, and Islamic sciences. The Almajiri system,

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involving student travel to study under renowned Islamic scholars, became widespread in Northern Nigeria.

Islamic education introduced formal structural elements including structured curricula based on Quranic studies, Arabic language, Islamic law (Sharia), and religious texts; formalized teacher-student relationships with students (Almajiris) studying under recognized scholars (Malams); literacy development through Arabic script and literary traditions; and intellectual networks connecting to broader Islamic intellectual traditions across North Africa and the Middle East (Boyd & King, 1971). Islamic education contributed significantly to literacy, scholarship, and intellectual development in Northern Nigeria, producing administrators, judges, teachers, and community leaders who played important roles in pre-colonial governance structures, particularly in the Sokoto Caliphate and Islamic emirates. Islamic planning of education was more systematic meaning it featured systematic levels of classes, curricula that were religious in nature and financing that was based on a community or emirate.

Challenges of Pre-Colonial Educational Planning in Nigeria

1. *Absence of formal curricula and standards:* Education was oral and informal. Absence of written curricular frameworks made inter-regional transfer and scaling difficult.
2. *Fragmentation across ethnic and religious lines:* Different objectives (vocational, ritual, religious) led to low interoperability between systems and no unified national standards.
3. *Limited scalability and access beyond communities:* Education was efficient for locally relevant skills but not easily scale for large, centralized state needs.
4. *Unequal emphasis on literacy forms:* Indigenous knowledge often prioritized apprenticeship and oral transmission, while Islamic systems taught Arabic literacy but this literacy did not map conveniently onto colonial needs.
5. *Weak institutional record keeping and data for planning:* The absence of records made long-term planning or demographic projections impossible.

These limitations reduced pre-colonial systems' suitability for a national, industrializing state. Thus, they were strong socially and culturally but weak for producing the kinds of standardized human capital required by modern public administration.

Colonial Era Educational Planning in Nigeria (1842-1960)

Planning of education in the colonial era took off with the coming of Christian missionaries in the 1840s. The first Western schools were mostly founded by missionaries to spread the gospel, educate catechists, produce interpreters, and create clerks to govern the colonies (Fafunwa, 1974; Taiwo, 1980). The curriculum was Eurocentric as it focused on reading, writing, arithmetic, and religious education, and had little to do with Nigerian socio-economic realities. Planning was highly disjointed, and it was motivated by the expansion of the missions and not the national development (Osokoya, 1987).

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The 1887 Education Ordinance

The 1887 Education Ordinance marked the colonial government's first formal regulatory attempt, establishing fundamental principles shaping subsequent educational policy and planning. Key provisions included establishing the Central Board of Education with the governor as chairman, members of the legislative council, four governor nominees, and the inspector of schools; appointing school inspectors for oversight and monitoring; extending grants-in-aid to teacher training colleges and qualifying schools; empowering the governor to establish new schools, marking governmental acceptance of educational responsibility; conditioning grants-in-aid on subjects taught and excellence demonstrated; classifying teacher certificates; and authorizing secondary and technical education scholarships (Taiwo, 1980).

Despite these provisions, the ordinance represented planning designed primarily for control rather than development, institutionalizing a partnership system between government and missionary agencies characterizing Nigerian education for decades, with government providing limited funding while missionaries retained significant control over educational content and administration.

The Phelps-Stokes Commission (1922)

The Phelps-Stokes Commission, formed in 1920 by an American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society and funded by the Phelps-Stokes Fund, conducted comprehensive studies of education in British West African territories including Nigeria. The commission's 1922 report criticized existing educational practices and made significant reform recommendations. The commission criticized curriculum disconnection from African realities, noting that educational approaches already outdated in America and Europe were being imposed on African children.

Key findings included educational system disorganization and inadequate supervision, neglect of mass education with access limited to privileged minorities, absence of indigenous leadership with Africans unprepared for educational leadership roles, and curriculum irrelevance failing to prepare students for productive community life. The commission recommended more practical and relevant education emphasizing character development, health promotion, agricultural and industrial skill acquisition, family life improvement, and establishment of suitable education policies with sound administrative, supervisory, and inspection principles (Osokoya, 1987).

The E.R.J. Hussey Reforms (1929) and the 1942-1944 Education Plans

Following Phelps-Stokes Commission recommendations, Mr. E.R.J. Hussey, Director of Education, initiated 1929 reforms proposing gradual educational development over 50-100 years, allowing controlled school facility growth and quality maintenance. His proposals introduced a three-tier structure: six years primary education emphasizing agriculture, hygiene, handicraft, and local environment studies; six years secondary education preparing graduates for employment; and higher vocational education providing university-status vocational courses. This

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led to Yaba Higher College establishment in 1932, offering vocational education in agriculture, forestry, medicine, veterinary science, surveying, and engineering, though Nigerian nationalist criticism for not granting university degrees eventually contributed to University College, Ibadan's 1948 establishment.

The 1930s economic depression created financial difficulties sustaining schools and paying teachers. The colonial authority developed the 1942 Education Plan linked to the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, emphasizing increased financial assistance, expansion, regulation, and management. However, severe criticism and rejection followed due to lacking systematic staged development over specific periods, preparation in Lagos without provincial consultation, inadequate provincial needs assessment, and inaccurate or unavailable statistical data.

Learning from 1942 plan failures, the colonial government introduced the comprehensive Ten-Year Education Plan in 1944, implemented in 1947 following the Richards Constitution of 1946 dividing the country into Northern, Western, and Eastern regions. Despite ambitions, the plan largely failed due to vaguely defined objectives, inadequate implementation mechanisms, poor coordination between administrative levels, and insufficient financial resources (Nte, 2007).

Challenges of Colonial Educational Planning in Nigeria

1. *Eurocentric curricula and lack of contextual relevance:* Colonial curricula prioritized literacy, catechetical instruction and clerical skills required by colonial administration rather than local economic development.
2. *Missionary dominance and fragmented governance:* Missionary societies controlled schools even where government provided grants and this produced inconsistent standards and priorities.
3. *Regional imbalance:* Investment concentrated in other regions, while northern region received less formal schooling, producing lasting regional disparities.
4. *Underfunding, adhoc financing and minimum cost policies:* Plans such as Hussey's were cautious and constrained by colonial budget priorities, limiting expansion and teacher remuneration.
5. *Poor machinery for implementation and statistical gaps:* The 1942 and 1944 plans suffered from weak implementation mechanisms and lack of reliable data for phased expansion.
6. *Training and quality problem:* Teacher training lagged behind enrollment expansion, while quality control through inspection was limited.

Although colonial reforms introduced formal structures and institutions, they were designed to serve colonial administrative needs rather than equitable national human resource development, while implementation capacity and finance constrained the plans' ambitions.

Post-Colonial Educational Planning in Nigeria (1960-1999)

The developmental planning of education in Nigeria started with the independence of the country in 1960 through regional planning, man power demands, national

development plans and changing policy frameworks. It was the time of attempts to rearrange the system of inherited colonialism, to enlarge the possibilities of access, to coordinate education and national aims (Fafunwa, 1974; Taiwo, 1980; Osokoya, 1987).

Early Independence Era (1960-1979)

The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 granted Nigerian regions legislative authority over education, health, agriculture, and local government, leading to regional educational planning initiatives. The Western Regional Government pioneered by launching the Universal Primary Education scheme in 1955, representing revolutionary free and compulsory education for Black Africa (Osokoya, 2010). However, the scheme faced serious challenges including teacher shortages resulting in poor standards, inadequate supervision, insufficient facilities and equipment, management difficulties from rapid enrollment growth, and funding crises exacerbated by collapsing cocoa prices.

The Eastern Regional Government introduced its 1953 education plan advocating free primary education, delayed until 1957 by political crises. The eight-year program faced numerous difficulties including untrained teachers, poor facilities with teaching in partially finished buildings, insufficient funds for salaries, and school closures by 1958. The Dike Commission investigation found the region spending over 30% of its budget on education, primarily for primary education (Edame, 2015). Following recommendations prioritizing quality over quantity, the government modified its approach to a three-year no-fee system followed by three-year fee-paying system. The Northern Regional Government focused on rural and adult education rather than universal primary education, creating educational disparities with lasting implications.

The Ashby Commission (1959) and Higher Education Development

Anticipating independence and high-level manpower needs, the Federal Government established the Ashby Commission in 1959 to examine Nigeria's higher education needs for twenty years. Major objectives included upgrading employed Nigerians needing higher education, developing post-secondary education producing required high-level manpower by 1970, and designing expandable education systems toward 1980 targets without requiring complete re-planning.

Key recommendations included university expansion through establishing University of Nigeria, Nsukka, creating a northern university (leading to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria), establishing Lagos university offering commerce, business, and economics programs, and transforming University College, Ibadan into full autonomous university. Curriculum development emphasized degree courses in education, engineering, commerce, law, medicine, and agriculture with national perspectives. The commission recommended university autonomy with degree-granting authority and establishing the National Universities Commission (NUC) to regulate university activities and advise on finance, courses, and program quality.

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Based on these recommendations, the Federal Government established NUC in 1962, converting it to statutory body status in 1974. NUC responsibilities encompassed recommending federal university financial requirements, monitoring expenditures, channeling grants, approving new universities and degree-granting institutions, authorizing new faculties and programs, collecting and disseminating university data, reviewing staff terms and conditions, and serving as conduit for external aid. Additional regulatory bodies included the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) coordinating technical and vocational education, regulating polytechnics, colleges of technology and agriculture, and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) streamlining college of education activities and maintaining teacher education standards.

Post-Independence National Development Plans and The National Policy on Education

After independence in 1960, Nigeria attempted systematic educational planning through National Development Plans. The First National Development Plan (1962-1968) emphasized education as key investment for national development, focusing on expanding facilities, improving quality, developing technical and vocational education, and teacher training (Taiwo, 1980). The Second National Development Plan (1970-1974), following civil war, prioritized national unity through education, universal primary education preparation, secondary and tertiary expansion, and curriculum reform addressing national needs. The Third National Development Plan (1975-1980) prepared ground for Universal Primary Education, emphasizing educational access, equity, quality improvement, and relevance to national development needs (Osokoya, 1987).

The Federal Military Government promulgated the first National Policy on Education in 1977, providing comprehensive framework for educational planning and development. The policy established national educational philosophy and goals including education for national unity, self-reliance, individual and national development, and effective citizenship. The policy introduced the 6-3-3-4 education structure and has undergone multiple revisions (1981, 1988, 2004, 2007, 2014) addressing emerging challenges and aligning with contemporary needs (Adesina, 1981).

The 1976 Universal Free Primary Education (UPE) Scheme

In September 1976, General Olusegun Obasanjo's military administration launched the Universal Free Primary Education scheme, marking Nigeria's most ambitious educational initiative. The program aimed to provide equal educational opportunities to all school-age children, gradually eliminate illiteracy and ignorance, and promote national unity and development. The Federal Government assumed full financial responsibility, initiating massive teacher training programs and constructing new primary schools. By 1976, eight million pupils enrolled, growing to over fifteen million by 1980.

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Structural Changes and Reforms (1980s-1990s)

The 1982 education plan introduced the 6-3-3-4 system restructuring Nigerian education: six years primary education, three years junior secondary education, three years senior secondary education, and four years university education (Osokoya, 1987). Objectives included instilling lasting literacy and numeracy, developing communication skills, providing character and moral training, developing sound attitudes, and equipping learners to adapt to changing environments. The system introduced pre-vocational subjects at junior secondary level and diversified senior secondary education into science, humanities, and technical streams, aiming to produce graduates with both academic knowledge and practical skills.

The 1980s brought severe economic challenges significantly affecting educational planning. Structural Adjustment Program implementation reduced public spending, educational funding declined substantially, infrastructure deteriorated, brain drain intensified as qualified teachers and academics sought opportunities abroad, and quality declined across all levels. These economic difficulties exposed educational planning weaknesses and highlighted education sector vulnerability to economic fluctuations, with planning becoming more focused on managing resource constraints than expansion or quality improvement.

Challenges of Post-Colonial Educational Planning in Nigeria

1. *Policy discontinuity and political interference:* Frequent regime changes (civilian and military) produced policy shifts and interrupted long-term plans.
2. *Chronic underfunding and fiscal management:* Recurrent budget shortfalls, delayed teacher salaries and poor infrastructure maintenance undermined implementation.
3. *Rapid enrolment growth without commensurate capacity:* UPE and other expansion programmes swelled enrolment but created teacher shortages, overcrowding and dilapidated facilities.
4. *Brain drain and human resource quality decline:* Out-migration of trained taechers and academics reduced institutional capacity and raised reliance on less qualified staff.
5. *Weak monitoring, evaluation and data systems:* Lack of accurate, timely data impeded planning, resource targeting and impact assessment.
6. *Regional inequality and policized resource allocation:* Resources often followed political priorities rather than objective need while rural areas remained underserved.
7. *Curriculum labour market mismatch:* Persistent misalignment between training and national skills demands, causing unemployment even among graduates.

Post-colonial planning succeeded in expand access but failed to sustainably finance and manage quantity with quality. However, the result of of the system was strained by growth, weak data systems, and uneven outcomes.

Suggestions for Improvement

1. Investment in capacity to collect disaggregated enrolment, staffing and expenditure data to enable evidence-based planning and monitoring.
2. Scaling up pre-service and in-service training, better remuneration, incentives for rural deployment and career-path planning to reduce brain drain.
3. Strengthening technical, vocational and entrepreneurial education with clear pathways to employment and industry partnerships.
4. Prioritise underserved regions with conditional transfers, school feeding and infrastructure programs to reduce regional gaps.
5. Institutionalise rigorous M&E units that conduct impact evaluation and feed results back to policy cycles.
6. Use digital procurement, public expenditure tracking, and community oversight to reduce leakages and ensure funds reach schools.
7. *Integrate indigenous knowledge and local relevance:* Where appropriate, incorporate local skills, languages and cultural content into curricula to preserve relevance and community ownership.

Conclusion

The historical analysis of the evolution of educational planning in Nigeria shows that every pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial period left its own mark on the education system development in the country and at the same time gave rise to restrictions that would further define the current results. Even pre-colonial planning, which was culturally applicable and community-based, had no formal structures and no scalability. Ordinances, grant-in-aid system, inspection mechanisms, and formal curricula that were introduced during the colonial era were mostly Eurocentric and were not in touch with real-life socio-economic realities in the country.

The focus of post-colonial planning on extending access via regional UPE schemes, national development plans, National Policy on Education, and structural reforms still did not result in sustainable development, as problems related to poor funding, lack of policy continuity, inequality in regions, poor data infrastructure and curriculum-labour market mismatch persisted. However, proper educational planning in Nigeria needs consistency in the design and execution of policies, a stable governance over a long period, use of sound data to make decisions and an alignment of national development priorities with the educational objectives.

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