

# Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice in Education in Nigeria

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## **Introduction**

I am honored with this wonderful opportunity to deliver this Address to this distinguished gathering of educationists, patriots and humanists, the 41<sup>st</sup> Philosophy of Education Conference. I thank the organizers for finding me worthy of the invitation. I am not a trained “educationist”, although I have spent over 30 years in a tertiary education institution, “teaching”, as well as struggling, together with others, to improve the conditions of work and conditions of service in our educational institutions. By so doing, we necessarily also focused on issues of access to, quality and relevance, infrastructure and facilities, and funding of education in our country, Nigeria. The ‘notoriety’ we have acquired as ASUU activists over decades of advocacy for accessible, qualitative and relevant education, and national human capital development, seems to have created the perception that we are “experts” of some sort, on all matters concerning education; that perception may have justified or rationalized granting me this honor of being chosen to address this august gathering! But this is a tall ambition; and I only came to terms with my incompetence when I began to prepare for this presentation; I came to the realization that the way I want to handle this topic:

“Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice in Education”, would be at variance with the expectations of many of the esteemed professional educationists members of this Association in this gathering.

For, predominantly, professional educationists would treat this topic from the perspective of teacher training, and the relative weight to be given to theoretical as opposed to practical training of teachers (e.g. see John Dewey). At issue would seem to be the time spent in class room theoretical training, at the expense of practical, or field or even laboratory training for teachers, with regards to technique of class instruction and class management, and skills and proficiency in teaching.

However, as a political scientist and a student of governance and public policy, I have chosen to approach issues from the, somewhat unconventional, perspective of how theory informs (or does not inform) practice in our governance processes, especially in policy-making and implementation of educational provisioning and development in a developing country such as Nigeria. It is in this sense that I see a wide and widening gap between theory and practice of education in Nigeria with profound consequences.

Education at all levels in the Nigerian federal system has been engulfed by a profound crisis of relevance, both with regards to the attainment of national development goals since the 1980s and with regards to education being the tool for individual’s self-development and exploration of self-worth and thereby making an individual a

productive member of society. There has been a lot of talk about reforms, repositioning and restructuring of the education system and sector, with disappointing outcomes. Last week, there was a news report to the effect that President Buhari has directed the Minister of Education to organize a Summit on Education to address the salient issues, which have bedeviled the sector and the system. One would only hope that the outcome would not be as disappointing and useless as the previous efforts. The pertinent question, I guess, is: why did we allow things to be so bad for so long?

In addressing that question, I recognize that there are many reasons responsible for this situation but that, a key explanatory factor may well be the disjuncture between theory and practice: while many nations have made assiduous efforts to bridge the gap between theory and practice in policy making and implementation, we in Nigeria have ignored both the theory and the practice of education provisioning and development, in policy conceptualization and its implementation. We have failed to use good theories to inform our policies; the policies in practice have been inconsistent and convoluted in many fundamental respects; and we have generally allowed the gap between theory and practice to widen phenomenally, rather than actually, systematically bridge it. I argue that, to get our act together and begin to make serious progress in addressing the Nigerian education crisis, we must, as a priority, focus attention on bridging the gap between theory and practice in education provisioning, in particular in policy formulation and implementation. Many countries that are cited as models of education development and provisioning, such as Norway, have

made such tremendous progress, essentially because of the demonstrable capacity to bridge the gap between theory and research outcomes on the one hand, and practice, in terms of policy-making and implementation, in comparison with other countries. We need to imbibe/adapt global best practices to improve our pitiful situation acute crisis, which we continue to muddle through.

### **Crisis in the Nigerian Education Sector: Dimensions, Causes, and Consequences**

The statistical indicators of Nigeria's education crisis are calamitous. For example, there are millions of primary school age children who are not in school, most especially females, who are remarkably disadvantaged. This is one of the worst cases on the African continent. An estimated 10 million out of 30 million school aged children are not in school at the basic education level. With regards to the tertiary education, gross enrollment ratios are less than 6%, which is the African average, while the average for the developed world is 26%. With specific reference to the university system, a relatively small percentage of those who qualify to enter universities are actually enrolled. For example, in the 2008/09 academic year, 1,054,060 applied to enter the universities, only 200,000 (18.9%) were admitted (Shuwara 2010, p. 11). Furthermore, when enrollment figures are disaggregated, far more men are enrolled than women. Between 2008 and 2010, average enrollment into Nigerian universities is said to be 37.6% women and 62.4 % men (US Embassy 2012). And, contrary to what would seem to be the global trend, in Nigeria, students prefer to enroll into universities, the apex of the tertiary education system, rather than to polytechnics, colleges of

education or mono-technics. For example in 2010, while 1,330,531 sat for the UME, only 45,140 sat for the MPCE (see Shuwara 2010, p. 7; Jega 2016, p 9).

The transition rate from primary to secondary schools enrolment in the pipeline shows a fallout rate of significant percentages, one of the lowest in Africa. Then, an incredibly small percentage of those who finish secondary schools in relative terms, get enrolled into the tertiary education sector. Indeed, less than 20% of those who pass the UTME and qualify for admission into universities actually got admitted. Hence, access to education, the widening of which has theoretically been advanced as crucial to educational advancement in any country, is terribly constricted in the Nigerian case.

Widening access in tertiary education was the main justification for the rapid expansion of private universities, from a few first registered in 2000, to close to 70 in 2017. Given their high tuition fees, the private universities have recorded relatively marginal enrolment figures and, thus, have not significantly widened access to tertiary education.

Besides access, the infrastructure and facilities, instructional materials and staffing for schools, from basic to tertiary education, for the relatively few that gain access have been horrendous. There are regular reports and news from across the states, of pupils receiving instruction under trees, or in dilapidated and over crowded classrooms. More recently, the news outlets were inundated with the

massive failure of teachers in an examination organized to assess them in Kaduna state.

All these have impacted negatively on quality and relevance of education and training imparted to, or received by pupils and students, at all levels of the education sector; which has, in turn, affected human capital development and its value addition to national development. The negative consequences have been that, our schools, rather than imparting knowledge and skills, have basically been certificating ignoramuses if not illiterates. Graduates of our educational institutions are increasingly jobless; with employers of labor questioning the quality and relevance of the “education” these young men and women have acquired. The World Bank has estimated that there about 11 million youth in Nigeria are unemployed (many of them graduates); a situation exacerbating the challenges of the youth bulge in the Nigerian political economy (See Jega 2017).

Disjointed and convoluted policies, misplaced priorities and chronic underfunding have negatively affected education in Nigeria. The United Nations has asserted that low level public investment in education (i.e. less than 6% of GNP) impacts negatively on a country’s Human Development Index (HDI) ranking (UN 2015). Countries with the best education systems and with the highest HDI rankings are those that have invested more than 6% of their GNP on education.

To positively address and reverse the education crisis, Nigeria must accord education the right priority, back this up with clear, well

targeted and consistent policies; and provide the requisite funding to expand access, increase schools infrastructure and facilities; recruit, train and retain teachers, improve quality as well as ensure relevance of the education provided at all levels.

No doubt, doing all these successfully would also require a striving to bridge the gap between theory and practice in education. It would require capacity to do rigorous evidence based research; deployment appropriate theoretical postulations and frameworks to guide policy and engagement/partnership between intellectuals, academics and educationists and public officials and institutions in charge of education policy-making and execution. Regrettably, the relationship between academics, educationists and policy-makers leaves much to be desired.

### **The Disdain for Theory and evidence-based research**

Nigerian political leaders generally, and policy makers in particular, are specialists in muddling through simple as well as complex situations. Research, knowledge, rigorous assessment and critical analysis hardly inform evaluation of policy options and decisions about policy choices. This is partly because of the deep-seated ignorance and poverty of ideas, which bedevil those in political and bureaucratic leadership positions and especially because of the disdain for facts, reason and theories as important inputs in the governance processes. Of course, the declining culture of empirical and evidence-based research, imbued with theoretical rigor amongst the Nigerian intellectuals and academics, due to the crisis in the education sector, does not help matters. As Turner has observed:

...the failure of policy-makers to engage with theory and the failure of researchers to provide a sound basis for policy-making is a relationship (or lack of relationship) that has faults on both sides (2007, 1).

In the Nigerian context, the disjuncture between theoretical rigor and policy-making and implementation is largely because of the attitude and mindset of public officials; and the disjuncture is so acute that policy-making is essentially left to the irrational, prebendal and self-serving predilections of leaders with authoritarian mindsets. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, for example, the reasoned, evidence-based arguments advanced by ASUU countering IMF/World Bank recommendations for cuts in public expenditures, especially to education, were perceived by the then rulers as extremist and confrontational demands, brushed aside and dealt with highhandedness. Not much has changed since then, with regards to the attitude of leaders in making use of rigorous theoretical research to inform policy-making and implementation. It is arguable that, education, more than any other sector has suffered most as a consequence of all these.

### **Practice without perfection**

It is a common saying that “practice makes perfect”. May be in games, such as football and basketball, this is so, to some extent. But in real life policy-making and implementation in the governance process of a country, such as Nigeria, “practice”, which is devoid of a theoretical framework and empirical rigor invariably results in gross imperfection and failures, which are avoidable. Even in games,



success is more assured, with plans carefully worked out, within rigorous theoretical frameworks.

## **Conclusion**

While, certainly, there is a wide gap in Nigerian education system between theory and practice in teacher training; and it needs to be bridged, for quality assurance and improvement in learning processes; I believe that, more importantly, attention should be focused on the gap, which exists between theory and practice in policy-making and implementation relating education provisioning and development in Nigeria. This is an absolute requirement for addressing the crisis, which has engulfed education in our country. We cannot and should not continue with the situation in which policy makers treat theory as a basis of praxis with contempt and disdain, whether ignorantly or arrogantly and selfishly. This can be better facilitated by first, academics and especially educationists paying attention to scientific rigor, evidence-based research and articulating good theoretical frameworks for our education policies and their appropriate and timely execution. Secondly, our academics and educationists have to improve their engagement with, and advocacy, to policy-makers to facilitate speedy bridging of the gap between theory and practice in education policies and provisioning. For long, this has been left to be pursued for unions and it is necessary to explore other complimentary collective efforts, especially by professional bodies, such as the Organizers of this conference, either singly or in partnership with other professional groups.

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