



Journal of Frontiers in Multidisciplinary Research

The National Curriculum Conference and Educational Development in Nigeria: A Historical Analysis

Ogeh Obitor Wizoma Matthew ^{1*}, Dakoru Alfred Osomkume ²

¹⁻² Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author: **Ogeh Obitor Wizoma Matthew**

Article Info

E-ISSN: 3050-9726

P-ISSN: 3050-9718

Impact Factor (RSIF): 7.34

Volume: 07

Issue: 01

Received: 26-01-2026

Accepted: 28-02-2026

Published: 30-03-2026

Page No: 240-243

Abstract

The paper considered the 1969 national curriculum conference in Nigeria. The national curriculum conference was convened to discuss the challenges in the Nigeria educational system and how best to remodel and advance it to meet Nigeria developmental ideals after she gained independence in the 1960. It was observed that the inherited colonial-missionary education in practice before the conference was convened, was considered to be very bookish, narrow in scope, too classical and lack of content diversification, irrelevant and unfavourable to meet the technological and economic goals and developmental aspirations of the emergent nation. Hence the conference was convened to address all the anomalies identified in the missionary- colonial education. The conference was indigenous and at the instance of the Nigerian Education and Research Council (NERC), with support from the UNESCO, with many international observers in attendance. The conference was the first of its kind in Nigeria, in that, it brought Nigerians from all walks of life together to discuss how best education could be used to meet Nigerian developmental needs. The conference was a major landmark in the history of Nigeria in that it revolutionized education positively in Nigeria. The conference gave rise to many other conferences and meetings through which many educational policies and programmes emerged in Nigeria. Some of the outcome of the national curriculum conference was the national policy on education of 1977, the 6:3:3:4 system of education and many other educational programmes aimed at encouraging nation-building in Nigeria.

Keywords: Curriculum, Conference, Educational Development

Introduction

Before Nigeria gained her independence from the British colonial government, in October, 1960, there had been several education ordinances and policies. However, these policies were targeted at meeting the need of the three institutions (the missionaries, the trading companies and the British colonial government) that represented the western civilization in Nigeria. It was after Nigeria gained independence in October, 1960, that the citizens were saddled with the responsibility of formulating the first indigenous education policy to address the need of the Nigerian nation. To be able to accomplish this, the first indigenous curriculum conference was convened from the 8-12 of September, 1969 at Lagos, Nigeria. The purpose of the national curriculum conference was to discuss a new educational system to meet developmental demands for the emergent nation. Given the fact that the missionary-colonial education that was bequeathed to Nigeria at independence only served and met the needs of the missionary-colonial institutions. The national curriculum conference was a detour to fathom an indigenous and relevant education system to meet the needs and aspiration of the new emergent nation.

Due to the very bookish nature of the colonial –missionary education in Nigeria, after independence in 1960, it became imperative that the educational system must be addressed to reflect the needs and the developmental ideals of the Nigerian Nation. Lawal, in Ipaye (1992) ^[6, 7], posits that the inherited colonial education does not encourage self employment, it was narrow in scope and irrelevant and unfavourable to the technological and economic goals of the developing nation. Fafunwa (2004) ^[4] also posited that the Africans criticized the education given to the Africans by the missionaries and the colonial government to be too literary and too classical to be useful, that at the end of the school course,

the leavers were still not fit to meet any of the definite needs of the community except possibly those employed as clerks for the commercial houses or those who became teachers. Fafunwa, further maintained that there had been an over production of those who could write and talk and an under supply of those who till and repair. Ipaye (1992) ^[6] further maintained that the colonial education was plagued by lack of content diversification, and does not correspond to the realities of the country, hence the need to chart a new course for an education system that would be relevant to the needs of the new nation.

The 1969 National Curriculum Conference

The national curriculum conference was a conference organized by the people (Nigerians) and for the people to discuss vital national and education issues to move Nigeria forward and encourage national development. Okoh (1993), in Ogbonda (2002) maintained that the national curriculum conference was amongst others, to review the inherited missionary-colonial education system, identify new national ideals and recommend how best national development could be achieved through education at all levels- primary, secondary and the tertiary. Fafunwa (2004), further maintained that the national curriculum conference was constituted on the 8-12 September 1969 in Lagos, at the instance of the Nigeria Educational Research Council (NERC) to address Nigerian educational problems. According to Fafunwa (2004) ^[4], the 1969 curriculum conference was a conference of the people in that it comprised people from all walks of life including farmers, trade unions, women's organizations, youth club organizations, professional organizations etcetera. Taiwo (1986) ^[11] also affirmed that the conference was significant in that it was initiated and planned entirely by Nigerians. The conference among other things was charged with the responsibility of reviewing the old education system and to distinguish new national objectives for Nigerian institution remembering the requirements of young people and grown-ups in the undertaking of nation building and national reproduction for social and monetary prosperity of the individual and society (Fafunwa, 2004) ^[4].

The striking feature of this conference was that it was initiated and planned entirely by Nigerians. Amaele, Nwosu and Ejire (2011) ^[3], also observed that the effort made by the conference in putting together of various national targets was the most far reaching exertion made by any gathering or body in the historical backdrop of Nigeria as a nation. It is believed that the National curriculum conference marked a watershed in the Nigerian education system in the sense that the outcome of the proceedings revolutionized education positively in Nigeria. Fafunwa (2004) ^[4], also affirms that the National Curriculum Conference was a major landmark in the History of Nigeria and, indeed in the history of education in Africa; because such a conference had never been held before, not even in Europe, Asia or America.

The conference was financed by the Federal Government of Nigeria with the support of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Besides the seventeen lead papers presented at the conference, there were also plenary sessions and discussion groups that were all bordered on the national educational challenges in the country. However, it is worthy of note that attendance of the conference was somehow affected by the Nigerian Civil war, 1968-1970.

Abernethy (1969) ^[1], commenting on education disparity and national unity, observed that the educational disparity between the northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria was one of the contributory factor that led to the Nigerian civil war, besides other socio-political variables. After the civil war the need for national unity, integration, reconciliation and reconstruction was imperative. Therefore, the timing of the conference during a fierce civil war according to Taiwo, (1986) ^[11], brought into sharp focus the need for national unity and integration. Olajojo (2022) ^[10], maintains that the purpose of national integration is to build a united and strong nation. Given the fact that education was the major vehicle through which these ideals were to be achieved, emphasis was laid on finding the common elements which should unite the different ethnic communities of Nigeria into one indivisible entity. Taiwo (1986) ^[11], further maintained that the conference achieved many results in that it brought together Nigerians from many walks of life, education producers and consumers and got them talking face to face on the same theme and reached agreement on what they considered should yield the best product for Nigerian education.

Secondly the conference attracted many international observers whose experience enriched the deliberations of the discussion groups. Thirdly, the conference paved the way for another conference on the content of curriculum and implementation and a good ending to educational activities of the decade and a worthy prelude to the decade of rehabilitation, reconstruction and national development. This gave rise to various educational policies and programs in Nigeria by the military regimes to reconstruct the post war new Nigeria.

Some of the outcomes of the recommendations of conference was the National Policy on Education, the 6-3-3-4 system of education, and other programmes like the Universal Primary Education scheme (UPE), the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), the Unity schools etc., launched by the then Military regime in Nigeria. All these were aimed at addressing the educational disparity, and making education relevant to the aspirations of Nigerians, to build a united integrated New Nigeria, to encourage national unity and integration and to allay the apprehensions of the 1960s that snowballed to the Nigerian Civil War. Education was seen as the main vehicle through which national unity and integration can be achieved in Nigeria.

The National Policy on Education

After the National Curriculum Conference of the 1969, many educational issues schemes and programmes that surfaced in Nigeria later were hinged on the outcome and recommendation of the conference. One of such outcome was the National policy on education of 1977. Given the fact that education is the best speculation that can make for the fast advancement of the financial, political, sociological and resources associated with humans of a nation, it becomes imperative that the government of any nation must give education the attention it deserves as to achieve its national goals and objectives. The National policy on education was the outcome of majority of the educational issues discussed in the 1969 national curriculum conference (Adesina 1988) ^[2]. After the Nigerian civil war, given the fact that educational disparity was a major apprehension that caused the war (Abernethy 1969). The federal military government saw the same education as a major vehicle through which the poly-

ethnic Nigerian society must be galvanized into a united and integrated entity.

On the 4-8th of June, 1973, a national seminar to make proposal for national policy on education was held at the instance of the newly constituted National Council on Education under the chairmanship of Chief S.O. Adebayo. Ukeje in Ipaye (1992) ^[6] maintained that the inconsistencies, ambiguities and absence of consistency in the instructive practices in the distinctive parts of the nation was to be handled to guarantee an even and deliberate improvement of the nation. The outcome of this seminar was the national policy on education 1977. The policy incorporated the post war reconstruction and the 1970-74 development plans of General Yakubu Jack Gowon's Military Regime. The national policy on education provides inter-alia,

1. An undivided, solid and confident country;
2. An extraordinary and dynamic economy;
3. A just and populist society;
4. A place that is known for brilliant and full open doors for all residents, and
5. A free and a popularity based society.

Taiwo (1986) ^[11], posited that the keynote of the policy was a considerable involvement of the Federal Government in education as an instrument for national development and national unity. The national policy on education according to Ukeje in Ipaye (1998) was the first major attempt to articulate and unify the objectives of the Nigeria educational system at all levels and all aspect of the educational system. From that day Education ceased to be a private undertaking however, an enormous government investment and dynamic support. From thence the Federal Government of Nigeria embraced education as an instrument, second to none to effect national advancement and achieving unity within diversity.

The national policy on education provided for the educational structure of the 6-3-3-4 system that emphasized for a more technical and technologically oriented system of education that kick-started in 1982/83 school year. The national policy on education has been revised several times, the 1981, 1998, the 2004 with the 2013 edition as the latest, with recent updates on inclusive education, 2023 and the 2025 reform to accommodate the Almajiri education, teacher policy and security.

However, it is imperative to observe that before the first edition of the national policy on education came to the light of the day, the Military government under General Yakubu Gowon who was determined to see Nigeria united and integrated and had displayed such intention both in his utterances and in action had through military Decrees made educational policies and reforms which has positively affected the unity of the nation and integration in Nigeria. The national policy on education provides for basic education, secondary or post basic education and career development, mass and nomadic education, tertiary education, open and distant learning education, special needs education and educational support services.

The 6:3:3:4 System of Education

The 6-3-3-4 system of education was one of the educational programmes recommended for the reorganization of education and the development of Nigeria after the 1969 national curriculum conference. Prior to this period under review, the educational system bequeathed to Nigeria by the colonial government was the 6-5-2-3 system of education. This meant six years in the primary school, five years in the

secondary school, two years for higher school certificate or an advanced level programme and three years university programme with direct entry admission into institutions of higher learning. The system was criticized to be too literary and too classical to be useful to the Nigerian situation. This was because at the end of the course, the school leavers were still not fit to meet any of the definite needs of the community except possibly those employed as clerks for the commercial houses or those who become teachers.

Condemning the very bookish nature of the 6-5-2-3 system of education in Nigeria, Fafunwa (2004) ^[4], maintained that there had been an over production of those who could write and talk and an under supply of those who could till and repair. The 6-3-3-4 system of education programme was preferred, to address the anomalies in the 6-5-2-3 colonial educational system to meet the developmental ideals of the Nigerian state. This was more of a change from the British to the American system. Udoh (2012) ^[12], posited that the new policy states that the secondary school will be comprehensive and its curriculum is aimed at broadening the pupil's knowledge and outlook. The new system of education among other things provides an opportunity for higher education, equip the youth to live effectively in the modern age of science and technology; to develop and project Nigerian culture and foster national unity. The system of education is education for self reliance. Because of its emphasis on skills and individual self reliance, it was hoped that the country was to witness a boost in food production and technological development, thus creating employment for the teeming population and enhancing national development.

For this reason the curriculum was said to be society and child centred. The system required the child to spend six years in primary school, three years in the junior secondary, three years in the senior secondary and at least four years in the university. However, Adesina (1988) ^[2], maintains that the four years allocated to higher education might have to be divided into two (2) for programmes that do not necessarily lead to the award of degrees. Udoh (2012) ^[12], also noted that students who are unable to proceed further than the Junior Secondary School (JSS), would be reasonably equipped and issued with the JSS Certificate, to go into the world of work or apprenticeship. According to the Federal Ministry of Education Report (1990), only 32.2% of students who successfully complete the senior Secondary School Certificate examination (SSSCE) are absorbed by the universities. The selection into the Universities in Nigeria is through the national examination conducted by the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB).

Students who are not able or unwilling to enter the university, can acquire higher education in any of the polytechnics or in one of the colleges of education some of which have been approved to award degrees provided they are affiliated to universities. However, it is quite u

Unfortunate to note that the programme was not executed with the spirit and dynamism with which it was conceived as good as the objective was and so, failed to launch Nigeria into her technological dream world and development. From its inception the 6.3.3.4 system was faced with poor funding leading to lack of the required teaching equipment for the programme. There was no enough qualified teachers especially for the Intro-tech practical subjects to translate the lofty technological ideal of the programme to reality. As a result the 6.3.3.4 ended up as a mere educational programme on paper.

Conclusion

The paper historically discussed the national curriculum conference of 1969 in Nigeria and the eventual outcome of the conference, which were the national policy on education and the 6:3::3:4 system of education and other programmes not discussed here. A lot of changes have taken place in the Nigerian educational system since the recommended educational system came on board. However, it is imperative to observe that the Nigerian educational system today is left with much than is to be desired, given the fact that many products of the school system from primary to the university graduates roam the streets unemployed with its attendant social-political challenges, thus replicating the initial challenges that kick started the 1969 national curriculum conference. The contemporary societal challenges manifest in high number of out-of-school children, unemployed graduates of all levels of the school system, idleness, political thuggery and banditry, ethnic militancy, religious bigotry and fanaticism have placed the Nigerian state on a red alert, a situation even worse than the condition before the 1969 curriculum conference was convened., even challenging the very unity of Nigeria. A condition like this demands an urgent attention and solution. It is the candid recommendation of this paper that sovereign national conference be constituted to discuss the way forward in Nigeria to address all the challenges of today if progress must be made and solution proffered to save Nigeria as a nation, and that moment is now.

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How to Cite This Article

Wizoma MO, Osomkume DA. The National Curriculum Conference and Educational Development in Nigeria: A Historical Analysis. J Frontiers Multidiscip Res. 2026;7(1):240–243.

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