

Challenges and Innovations in Nigerian Primary Education Policy: A Periscope of Cross River State for a Path Forward

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges and innovative approaches within the Nigerian public primary education system, focusing on Cross River State as a case study. Despite the implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme and subsequent policies, the Nigerian primary education sector grapples with persistent issues including inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and socio-cultural factors that hinder access to education. These challenges contribute to high rates of educational exclusion and impact the nation's socio-economic development. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, incorporating semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (policymakers, principals, teachers, and community leaders) and a review of relevant literature. The study utilizes Human Capital Theory (HCT) as a theoretical framework to analyse the impact of educational investments on human and economic development. Findings reveal persistent challenges such as insufficient resources, including dilapidated infrastructure and inadequate learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, training gaps for teachers, and issues related to language of instruction and curriculum implementation. These deficiencies collectively hinder the development of human capital. The study concludes that addressing these multifaceted challenges requires increased investment in public primary education, robust teacher training and professional development programmes, curriculum reforms, the integration of educational technology, and the establishment of regular assessment mechanisms to monitor outcomes. The study emphasizes that there is a need for strategic interventions to cultivate human capital, achieve sustainable development, and improve the quality of life for all Nigerian children.

Keywords: Challenges, Innovative approaches, Public primary education

Introduction

Globally, education without doubt, has proven to be a fundamental cornerstone for development, laying the groundwork for a nation's economic progress, social cohesion, and governance effectiveness. When citizens are educated, they are empowered to become agents of change for national transformation. It is the reason why education is one of the rights of citizens (Udoka & Enya, 3). It is the bedrock of development of any nation and has a formative effect on the mind, character and physical capacities of the nation (Ayeni & Ebong, 1). In Nigeria, primary education remains a critical focus as the country grapples with issues such as high population growth rates and economic disparities. Despite various policies implemented since the enactment of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in 1976, the educational landscape in Nigeria continues to face significant challenges. These challenges include inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructural facilities, a shortage of qualified teachers, and cultural factors that hinder access to education, particularly for girls (Adebayo 23). In Cross River State for instance, many girls lack access to quality education due to inadequate infrastructure and socio-cultural barriers. Families facing financial difficulties may see marrying off their daughters as a way to alleviate economic burdens (Ayeni, Odey & Okon 29). These challenges have continued to hinder the realization of equitable and quality education for children. It has been observed that Nigeria has one of the highest rates of educational exclusion globally, with over 10 million children out of school (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization 15). This alarming statistic intensifies a multifaceted crisis that not only affects the lives of individual children but also stifles the nation's broader socio-economic development. History has even shown that the Nigerian educational system faced systemic challenges that impede its effectiveness. Following the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, the education system was designed to serve the elite, largely neglecting the rural and less privileged populations (Akintoye 45). Despite numerous governmental efforts to reform the education sector, such as the National Policy on Education, which was first implemented in 1977 and revised periodically, disparities in access and quality have persisted. The current policies often reflect a top-down approach that fails to put the perspectives of the local people and the specific needs of diverse communities within the nation in top gear (Adeleke 93). As a result, many children remain disenfranchised, particularly those in rural areas, girls, and children with disabilities.

Socio-economic factors play a crucial role in influencing educational outcomes in Nigeria. For instance, poverty remains a significant barrier to education. A situation where families are left to struggle to make ends meet often prioritizes immediate economic survival over long-term education (Obanya 112). Many young individuals, faced with limited economic opportunities, resort to internet fraud as a means of survival and social mobility. However, beyond economic motivations, there exists a deep-seated

cultural and religious dimension that underpins the activities of online fraudsters (Ayeni & Ayeni, 16). As legitimate avenues to societal success become blocked, especially for youth in urban Ghana and Nigeria, individuals adapt through innovation: turning to cybercrime as an alternative route to economic mobility (Ayeni & Ellah, 152). However, in some parts of the country especially the North, cultural attitudes toward education have also affected enrollment rates, especially among girls, who are frequently subjected to traditional norms that devalue female education (Emejulu and Bassett 170). Following, these societal dynamics exacerbate existing inequalities within the education system, creating a cycle of exclusion that is difficult to break.

In contrast to these challenges, there has been a notable emergence of innovative strategies aimed at improving educational quality and access. Over the past decade, various stakeholders including government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and communities have adopted these innovative strategies or creative solutions to tackle the pressing issues within the primary education sector, but these solutions have not yielded good fruit in the Nigerian public primary schools. Innovative practices have arisen, ranging from technology-driven learning solutions and alternative teacher training programmes to initiatives that promote community engagement and parental involvement in education (Innovations for Poverty Action 34). These models have worked tremendously in many parts of the world, accentuating the need for reform within the Nigerian primary education policy framework. For instance, the Nigerian government sought to implement policies that integrate technology into classrooms, such as the National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy for Education, which aims to enhance learning through digital resources (Ogunleye 67). Similarly, non-governmental organizations have initiated community-based programmes designed to empower parents and engage them in their children's education, thereby breaking down cultural and socio-economic barriers to learning (Adewale 204). Such innovations provide critical insights into how dialogue between policymakers and community stakeholders can lead to more effective educational strategies beyond Cross River State.

Overview of Nigerian National Policy on Education

Nigerian National Policy on Education may be described as an educational constitution policy document that embraces nearly all aspects of the Nigerian Educational system which serves as a guide to be followed. Ayeni & Ebong (2) observe that: The drive to achieve the millennium goal and the proper implementation of the Nigerian Policy on Education (NPE) should be seen as a means to mass economic participation and mobilization. The introduction of this policy document was a result of the National Curriculum conference or seminar of experts drawn from a wide range of interest groups within Nigeria

which took place in Lagos in 1973 (Mbayuav and Terna 1). They added that the constituents of this conference included voluntary agencies and external bodies that deliberated on what a national policy on education for an independent sovereign nation should be. “However, following the outcome of the seminar, a draft document was presented to the interest groups in which all the necessary comments were made and amended accordingly. Eventually, that later led to the final document that was produced, first in 1977. Ever since then, it has been revised up to the fifth edition which was the latest in 2012” (2). Today, we have the 6th edition of this policy which was used for this study. Talking specifically about the provision for Primary Education in the policy document, it states that:

(1) Primary Education is the education given to children aged 6-12 years. There shall not be more than 20 pupils to a teacher and a helper who is an assistant. (2) In primary and secondary schools, there shall not be more than 35 and 40 pupils respectively in a class. (3) Primary education shall be free (4) it shall provide opportunities for the child to develop life-manipulative skills that will enable the child to function effectively in society (5). In terms of class teaching, it says it shall be participatory, exploratory, and experimental. It proposes specialist teachers for particular subjects such as Mathematics, Basic Science, and Basic Technology, the medium of instruction in the Primary School shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first 3 years in monolingual communities (7-8).

The Problem of the Study

The Nigerian primary education sector is facing a myriad of challenges that hinder its effectiveness and accessibility. Despite the introduction of multiple educational policies and initiatives aimed at improving primary education, significant issues persist. These challenges include inadequate funding, leading to poor infrastructure and limited access to learning resources; a shortage of qualified teachers, resulting in low-quality teaching; and sociocultural factors that perpetuate discrepancies in enrollment, particularly for marginalized communities. However, while there are instances of innovative practices emerging within the sector such as the integration of technology in classrooms, community-driven educational programmes, and curriculum reforms, these solutions are sparsely and not uniformly implemented or scaled across the nation. As a result, the effectiveness of these innovations remains inconsistent, often failing to address the root causes of the ongoing challenges.

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the primary challenges facing the implementation of the Nigerian primary education policy in Cross River State?
2. How do existing innovations suggest tackling these challenges, and how effective are they in practice

in Cross River State?

3. What strategies can be identified to create a coherent path forward that ensures equitable access to quality primary education for all Nigerian Children?

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to explore the complex interplay between challenges and innovations in Nigerian primary education policy, critically analyzing how existing obstacles can be overcome and transformed through innovative approaches. The intention was to provide valuable insights and recommendations for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders committed to reforming Nigerian primary education.

Methodology

The study made use of a semi-structured interview component of the qualitative research method to gather data from the perspectives of key stakeholders including educational policymakers, school principals, and teachers, community leaders within Bekwarra, Yala, Odukpani, Calabar South, Calabar Municipality and Akpabuyo local Government Areas of Cross River State. While these interviews and materials from established publications, articles, journals, and textbooks, constituted secondary sources of data, the Nigerian National Policy on Education, 6th edition and the researcher's experiences of education challenges in Nigeria served as part of the primary sources of data.

Theoretical Framework

The study built its foundation on Human Capital Theory. HCT was conceptualized, and collaboratively developed by Adam Smith, Gary Becker and Theodore Shultz. The theory posits that an individual's or a nation's economic wealth is induced by investments in human abilities like education, training, and skills. Such investments help to amplify the individual's productivity and earning potential, just as investing in physical capital like machinery boosts a business's output.

The choice and relevance of HCT in this study are informed by the fact that it reveals how inadequacies in funding and resources are detrimental to developing human capital in Nigeria. It provides a framework for understanding the long-term implications of inadequate educational policies on economic growth and workforce development in Nigeria where essential human capital like Teachers, among others in the education sector should have been invested in through consistent training/retraining and professional development. This perspective helped the researcher to assess the effectiveness of

current training programmes in the study area and propose necessary innovations for improvement.

Findings and Discussions

The data gathered and presented below were oral and supported by pictures of infrastructures and class population in some primary schools in the study area. It is synthesized from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with various stakeholders in the Cross River State Primary Education Sector, including Teachers, School administrators, Parents, and educational policymakers. The purpose of these interviews was to gather in-depth insights into the challenges facing Nigerian primary education and to discuss innovative practices that could enhance the quality and accessibility of education. However, the interviews were grouped, analyzed and discussed through the descriptive narrative and transcription pattern.

Fundamental challenges in Nigerian primary education

1. **Insufficient Resources:** In every Institution of learning, physical amenities play an important role in teaching and learning, especially at the primary school level where the pupils' sense of imagination is still premature. A Teacher from Sacred Heart Primary School, Nyanya Idigwe, Bekwarra LGA, lamented during an interview that "we often lack basic instructional materials. Our buildings are in bad shape, and classrooms are overcrowded. We have been managing without proper resources, it's challenging to deliver quality education here." This is evidence in the pictorial data presented below:

Plate 1: Sacred Heart Primary School, Nyanya Idigwe, Bekwarra LGA, CRS





Source: Field work, retrieved on 13th October, 2025

As revealed above, it is very disheartening to say that the increase in primary school enrolment in rural areas in Nigeria does not have a corresponding increase in infrastructural development in these places as further shown below:

Table 1: Basic Education Statistics in Nigeria: Enrolment, Classrooms, and Classroom/Enrolment Ratio in Primary Schools, 2013-2014

	2013	2014
Enrolment	24,185,027	23,129,927
Schools	61,305	62,406
Classrooms	376,592	342,303
Classroom/ Enrolment Ratio	1:64	1:68

Source: National Bureau of Statistics and Universal Basic Education Commission, quoted in Ige Akindele Mathew (108).

The information in Table 4 reveals the enrolment, classrooms, and classroom/enrolment ratios at the primary level in Nigeria, from 2013 to 2014. As indicated in the table, in 2013, there were 376,592 classrooms in 61,305 primary schools and 342,303 in 62,406 schools in 2014. The classroom/enrolment ratio for the year was 1:64 contrary to the recommended ratio in the National Policy on Education (2013) where it is specified that for effective teaching at the primary level, the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:35. This issue of overcrowded classrooms as unfolded by this investigation, was predominant in the rural areas. Public Primary Schools in the urban communities lack the population to meet the recommended 1:35 teacher to pupils' ratio. This was largely due to the lack of interest of parents in enrolling their children/wards in public primary schools. Mr Steve Egbe, a Planning Officer with the Cross River State Universal Basic Education Board revealed during an interview that "Many public primary schools in Nigeria are perceived to offer lower quality education compared to private schools. Parents may believe that public schools lack qualified teachers, proper facilities, and adequate

learning resources. Public schools often face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient classrooms, poor sanitation, and inadequate teaching materials. These conditions can deter parents from enrolling their children”. “Parents might be influenced by the academic performance of schools. “If public schools in their area have a history of poor examination results, parents may opt for private institutions that boast higher success rates. More so, in the urban areas like Calabar, a good number of families with higher socioeconomic status may prefer private schools, believing they offer better educational prospects and opportunities for their children, which can lead to a preference for private institutions over public ones” (Dr Ibu Ochelebe, National Bureau of Statistics, CRS, Calabar: An interview). A principal in one of the Primary Schools in Calabar South LGA who prefers to remain anonymous, remarked during an interview that “There are concerns regarding corruption and mismanagement within the public education system which has led to loss of funding and poor service delivery, prompting parents to seek alternatives”. He continued “The issue of under-development of our public schools does not lie in the corridor of the government alone, there are bad individuals in the education sector that do not want the system to thrive. These individuals would not utilise government allocation to benefit the poor masses”.

Plate 2: Ikot Effanga Primary School, Calabar Municipality



Source: Field work, retrieved on 8th October, 2025

Plate 3: A structure of a primary school building in Odukpani, and population of a primary school at Calabar South Local Government Area, Cross River State



Source: Field work, retrieved on 18th October, 2025

2. **Training Gap:** The finding further reveals inadequacy in the number of Teachers and a lack of retraining of the Teachers who have chosen to stay in the system despite the obvious impoverishment. Teachers are a formidable influence in the education of children, so they should be equipped and updated with the right knowledge that can be passed on to the next generation. A rural school administrator in Akpabuyo local government area voiced, "Many teachers are not equipped with modern teaching skills. They were trained many years ago, and there's no ongoing professional development to keep them updated."
3. **Mother Tongue Usage in Teaching:** The National Policy on Education (2013) specifies that the medium of instruction in primary schools shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years where English will be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction while the language of the immediate environment and French, Arabic will serve as subjects. Findings during this investigation reveal that Children/pupils were taught using the English Language. The researcher's interaction with the teachers in Calabar revealed that a good number of parents judge the standard of a school by how well their children can communicate in the English Language. Some parents resolve to withdraw their children from such schools and enrol them in schools with a great standard of communication in English. The persistence of this situation consequently continues to challenge effective teaching, proper mastery of lesson contents, as well as the quality of primary education in Nigeria (Ige 109). Mother tongues embody cultural expressions, including stories, and songs. Exposing pupils to this form of expression not only helps them to learn their native language, but also enables the children to gain access to their cultural narratives, which enrich their understanding of their identity and history. Hence, Ayeni & Nsan (113) affirm that; teaching should aim to develop communicative skills that enable learners to function effectively in social and professional situations.

4. **Issue with Teaching Equilibrium:** The Nigerian primary education curriculum embraces many subjects. Normally, each of the subjects is supposed to be handled by a competent teacher to give room for proper understanding by the pupils, but the case with the Nigerian public primary schools was different as uncovered during the study. According to the National Policy on Education (2013), specialist teachers shall be provided for particular subjects, such as; Mathematics, Basic Science, Basic Technology, Physical and Health Education, Language Arts (in relation to English, Arabic, French, Sign Language and Nigerian Languages), Music, Fine Art, Home Economics, and Agricultural Science. Unfortunately, in most primary schools visited within the Cross River State region, a teacher teaches more than five different subjects in a day. Also, it is disheartening to say such a teacher has to write lesson notes for these courses, prepare a scheme of work for the subjects, administer tests and give homework to the pupils, as well as assess these assignments daily. There is a common saying that ‘you cannot give what you do not have’. It is possible that a teacher may not have mastery of all the subjects he or she has been compelled to teach, especially if some of these subjects are not quite related to his area of speciality. This situation caused by the shortage of teachers is not only affecting the quality of teaching and learning in primary schools, but also compounds the level of stress the few teachers available are subjected to. During an interview, a teacher with Ironbar Memorial Primary School, Calabar South LGA, CRS remarked “In some cases, when a teacher assigned to a particular class is unavoidably absent, it creates a vacuum because we don’t have enough hands. So what we do in such a situation is to merge the classes and this causes a lot of disruptions”. All of these issues have profound implications for human capital development. As captured in the theoretical framework, human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by individuals, which are crucial for economic productivity and societal growth. It is believed that the culmination of poor teaching and learning conditions leads to skill gaps in the workforce (Thompson 65). As pupils progress through the educational system under these identified constraints, there is a possibility that they may grow ill-prepared for higher education or vocational training, limiting their economic prospects. On the other hand, overloaded teachers may experience high levels of stress and burnout. This situation without doubt, can negatively affect their teaching effectiveness. Research shows that stressed teachers are less likely to engage students effectively, leading to a decrease in overall learning quality (Ingersoll et al. 18).

Conclusion

This study has highlighted pressing challenges confronting the Nigerian public primary education, such

as inadequate funding, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of qualified and adequate teachers. These challenges significantly hinder the development of human capital, which is essential for Nigeria's long-term socio-economic growth and competitiveness. The application of Human Capital Theory as a framework for analyzing these challenges and innovations emphasizes the critical relationship between education, economic development, and the cultivation of human potential. Human Capital Theory posits that investments in education yield significant returns, not only for the individuals who receive education but also for society as a whole. However, the current state of public primary education in Nigeria reveals a substantial gap in these investments, leading to a disconnection between educational attainment and economic opportunity. The study concludes that the inability of the Nigerian Government to provide a system that fosters quality education for all, risks perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment that affect the entire nation as currently being observed. Therefore, the path forward in Nigerian public primary education lies in recognizing education as an indispensable investment in human capital, vital for achieving sustainable development and improving the quality of life for all citizens.

Recommendations as Path Forward

In light of the findings from the study, it is clear that to harness the potential of Nigeria's human capital through education, focused and strategic interventions are required. Such interventions must address existing barriers while promoting inclusive and equitable educational practices. Inclusive communication therefore recognizes the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners and adapts strategies to ensure all students can access, engage with, and contribute to the learning process (Ayeni & Okon, 99). It is on the strength of this backdrop that the following recommendations are made:

1. The Nigerian government must significantly increase investment in public primary education, recognizing it as a fundamental driver for economic growth. This includes consistent funding for infrastructure, educational materials, and technology integration to create conducive learning environments.
2. Funds allocated to public primary education should be judiciously utilized by the education administrators instead of being seen or regarded as 'national cake. Cases of misappropriation of funds meant for education should be vigorously investigated and those found to be involved should attract capital punishment.
3. Develop robust programmes for teacher training and ongoing professional development. Policies should ensure that teachers are not only qualified but also equipped to engage students and address

diverse learning needs.

4. Implement incentive structures, such as competitive salaries, benefits, and career advancement opportunities for teachers, particularly in underserved areas.
5. Revise and implement curricula that reflect the local contexts, needs, and cultural relevance. Education should not only aim to impart knowledge but also to link learning with students' real-life experiences, thereby making it more applicable and engaging.
6. Invest in educational technology initiatives that enhance teaching and learning processes. This includes training for teachers on digital tools, creating online learning resources, providing a stable network and ensuring access to technology for students, especially in rural areas.
7. Establish mechanisms for regular assessment and evaluation of educational programmes to monitor outcomes related to human capital development. Data collection and analysis should focus on educational attainment, skills acquisition, and employability of graduates, providing evidence for informed policy adjustments.

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