



REIMAGINING RELEVANCE: POSITIONING POLICIES, PEDAGOGY AND PARTNERSHIPS FOR EQUITABLE GLOBAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The global education landscape is replete with paradoxes; promises of inclusive, equitable learning juxtaposed against persistent inequalities, especially in the Global South. This paper critiques the existing educational policies, pedagogical approaches and partnerships through the lens of relevance, arguing for urgent reforms that respond to context, cultural complexity and community aspirations. Drawing on African realities, particularly Nigeria's challenges and prospects, the paper positions policies, pedagogy and partnerships as the triple pillars of transformative education. Through a synthesis of global discovery and grounded experiences, the paper advances actionable recommendations to recalibrate education for equity, inclusivity and impact. It concludes with a clarion call to reimagine relevance, reposition reforms and realigns the promise of sustainable, people-centered, global education.

Keywords: Education Relevance, Global Policy Alignment, Indigenous Knowledge System, Triple Pillars of Education Policies, Pedagogy, Partnerships

Introduction

Education is the heartbeat of human development, the bedrock of societal transformation and the bridge between potential and progress. Across centuries and civilizations, education has been celebrated as a powerful catalyst for individual empowerment, social mobility, cultural preservation and national advancement (Noah & Dosunmu, 2020; UNESCO, 2003; World Bank 2023). Yet, in today's interconnected and increasingly complex world, glaring contradictions persist within global education systems. While knowledge production has accelerated, inequalities have widened; while access has expanded in theory, quality remains elusive in practice, and while policies abound, their promises often falter in the face of systemic constraint (Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023). At the epicenter of these contradictions lies an urgent and often-neglected imperative relevance. Education, to be meaningful, must mirror the realities of



learners; it must resonate with their cultural identities, respond to their socio-economic conditions and ready them for the demands of dynamic, digital and diverse global landscape.

Despite global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which aspires to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, the disconnection between lofty global aspirations and local lived experiences remain stark, particularly across the global South (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Sub-Sahara Africa epitomizes, these contradictions. While enrollment rates have improved in several countries, millions of children remain out of school, learning poverty persists and even among those within education systems, foundational skills acquisition is alarmingly low (Olanrewaju et al., 2022). Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation, and a microcosm of the continent's education dilemmas, reviews the gravity of the challenge. According to UNICEF (2023), over 20 million Nigerian children are out of school; countless others grapple with outdated curricula, dilapidated infrastructures, under-resourced teachers, and systemic exclusion based on gender, geographic and socio-economic status (UNICEF 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024).

The Problem of Imported Policies and Irrelevant Pedagogy

Many education policies and pedagogical practices across parts of sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the global South are imported, imposed or ill-adapted to the indigenous contexts. Policies, though crafted with rhetoric of equity and inclusion are frequently detached from grassroots realities, weakened by bureaucratic inertia and undermined by fragmented implantation (Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023; Ahmed et al, 2024). Pedagogical models, heavily influenced by colonial legacies, tend to prioritize rote memorization over critical thinking, foreign content over indigenous knowledge and standardized assessment over contextual learning (Dosunmu, 2012). The consequence is an education system that produces credentials but not competencies, certificates but not skills, and graduates who are ill-equipped to contribute meaningfully to nation development or global competitiveness (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

The forces of globalization, while facilitating knowledge exchange and technological innovation, have paradoxically widened education inequalities. Digital divides have become digital chasms, disproportionately excluding rural, marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities from accessing quality education (Ahmed, Belo, & Musa, 2024). Moreover, global benchmarks such as KISA rankings and donor driven education reforms risk promoting homogenized models that ignore socio-cultural diversity and suppress local agency (Tikley, 2020; Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023).

Nigeria and the Relevance Crisis

In Nigeria, the disconnect between education policies, classroom realities and labour-market demands is pronounced. While national policies advocate for inclusive, quality education, structural challenges ranging from inadequate infrastructure and underqualified teachers, to insecurity and systemic corruption, persistently undermine progress (Olanrewaju et al., 2022). Moreover, curricula that marginalize indigenous languages, histories and knowledge systems, erode cultural identity and hinder learner engagement (Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023). The persistent gender gap, compounded by socio-cultural norms and insecurity, further exacerbates exclusion, particularly for girls in Nigeria. To reimagine relevance is to fundamentally question, criticize and recalibrate education systems to reflect the aspirations, agency and realities of learners and communities. It is to dismantle outdated paradigms and disrupt inertia. It is to decolonize curricula, democratize decision-making and deliver learning that is more meaningful, measurable and nation-driven. In the words of Noah and Dosunmu (2020), education must evolve to meet the complexities of our time. However, evolution without relevance is rhetoric; transformation without contextualization is tokenism.

In Nigeria for instance despite decades of policy reforms, including Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, systemic challenges persist. Over twenty million remain out of school, with the highest ranges concentrated in the north east and North West regions which are affected by insurgency, poverty and socio-



cultural barriers (UNICEF, 2023). Among those in school, the quality of learning is undermined by overcrowded classrooms discontented teachers dilapidated infrastructures and curricula that often marginalize local languages history and socio-economic reality. This dissonance between policy, pedagogy and practice reflects and broader structural crisis of relevance a failure to align education with the involving needs, cultural contest and aspiration of learner and community.

Globalization, Digital Divides, and Cultural Disconnection

The forces of globalization, while facilitating unprecedented flows of knowledge, technology, and capital, have also deepened educational inequalities and exacerbated the relevance deficit. Digital technologies, though celebrated for their potential to democratize learning, remain inaccessible to millions across rural, low-income, and conflict-affected areas in Africa (World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). In Nigeria, significant digital divides persist, with only an estimated 40% of the population enjoying reliable internet access, while rural schools disproportionately excluded from digital learning innovations (Olanrewaju et al, 2022). Moreover, the widespread adoption of standardized, externally driven education models- often designed without sufficient input from local stakeholders- has led to curricula that prioritize Western epistemologies, marginalize indigenous knowledge, and erode cultural identity (Tikly, 2020; Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023). Such models risk producing graduates who are alienated from their socio-cultural roots, ill-equipped to address local development challenges, and unprepared for meaningful civic engagement.

The Triple Pillars: Policies, Pedagogy, and Partnerships

Addressing the crisis of relevance requires a comprehensive and courageous reimagining of the structural foundations of education systems, anchored in three interrelated pillars.

Policies must move beyond rhetorical commitments to become participatory context sensitive, and equity-driven instruments that reflect the aspirations and realities of learners, particularly the most marginalized (Ahmed et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Pedagogies must transcend outdated exclusionary models to embrace culturally grounded, learner-centered and innovation-driven approaches that equip learners with relevant skills, critical thinking abilities, and cultural pride (Tikly, 2020; Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023). Partnerships must evolve from tokenistic, donor-driven engagements to authentic, community-anchored collaborations that priorities local ownership, accountability, and sustainable impact (UNESCO, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024).

Rationale for the Paper

This position paper emerges against the backdrop of deepening education inequalities, widening relevance gaps, and the urgent need to recalibrate education systems for inclusion, equity, and impact. Grounded in contemporary scholarship and African realities, with a specific focus on Nigeria, the paper advances a bold proposition that relevance is the missing link in education transformation.

By critically interrogating existing policies, pedagogical practices, and partnership frameworks, the paper seeks to:

1. Illuminate the structural barriers system dysfunctions, and policy practice gaps undermining education relevance in Nigeria and comparable contexts;
2. Elevate the importance of indigenous knowledge, community engagement, and cultural contextualization in driving education reforms.
3. Provide actionable recommendations for repositioning policies, pedagogy and partnerships.

Nigeria's Education Landscape Complexities and Contradictions

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation offers a compelling case study of these education dilemmas. Despite successive policies including the National Policy on Education (2020 revised) and the Universal Basic Education Act (2024)- the country faces significant challenges in realizing inclusive and quality education for all (UNICEF, 2023). According to UNESCO (2023) and Ahmed et al. (2024) over 20 million Nigerian children remain out of school, accounting for the highest number globally. Disparities in access and learning



outcomes are particularly pronounced among girls in rural communities, and conflict affected population in the northeast and northwest region (Adebayo & Ezeanya- Esiobu, 2023)..

Furthermore, Nigerian education is characterized by

Inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classroom and insufficient learning material;

1. A mismatch between curricula and labour market demands, resulting in high youth unemployment and skill deficits.
2. Marginalization of indigenous languages histories, and knowledge systems within school curricula
3. Persistent gender inequalities and socio-cultural barriers that impede girl's education, particularly in northern Nigeria.
4. Widespread insecurity including attacks on schools, abductions, and displacement of learners and teachers (UNICEF, 2023; Olanrewaju et al., 2022).

Despite increased policy rhetoric and donor interventions, systemic gaps in implementation, monitoring accountability and community engagement continue to undermine education reforms in Nigeria (Ahmed et al 2024)

Globalization, Technology and the Relevance Paradox

Globalization and technological advancement have brought new opportunities for knowledge exchange, innovation, and cross border collaboration. The digital revolution has reshaped how education is delivered, offering potential for expanded access and personalized learning (Tikly, 2020; World Bank, 2023). However, these developments also introduce new contradiction. The digital divide, characterized by disparities in internet connectivity, digital infrastructure, and technology access, threatens to deepen educational inequalities, particularly for rural and marginalized communities (UNICEF, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024). Moreover, global education reforms often driven by donor agenda or international benchmarks, risk imposing homogenized models that overlook socio- cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge and community agency (Adebayo & Ezeanya Esiobu, 2023).

Thus, reimagining relevance requires a nuance approach that balances global innovations with local realities, ensuring that education systems are both globally competitive and contextually grounded.

The Relevance Deficit in Global Education

The question of relevance -whether education meaningfully reflects the lived experiences, aspiration and socio-cultural identities of learners – has emerged as a critical fault line within global education discourse (Tikly, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). Across Africa and other parts of the Global South, education policies, pedagogies, and partnership s have frequently been shaped by external actors, global benchmarks, and imported models that insufficiently engage with indigenous knowledge systems, local development priorities, and community realities (Ahmed et al., 2024, Olanrewaju et al., 2022). As a result, education reforms, though often well-intentioned have failed to bridge the gap between policy pronouncements and classroom realities, between global aspirations and local contexts and between increased access and improved learning outcomes (Adebayo & Ezeanya – Esiobu, 2023).

The Global Local Disconnect: The Policy Practice Paradox

In practice, the translation of global education policies into local contexts remains fraught with contradictions, tension, and systemic bottleneck. Across much of the Global South- and particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa – education systems grapple with deep-rooted governance deficits, resource constraints, socio cultural complexities, and political instability that hinder the effective domestication and implementation of global directives (UNESCO, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024). Nigeria exemplifies this policy practice paradox. The country has endorsed multiple international education frameworks, including SDG 4, the Global Education 2030 agenda and regional initiative under the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) (UNICEF, 2023). National policies, such as the National policy on Education (2020 revised). The Universal Basic Education Act (2024). The Safe Schools initiative, reflect alignment with global aspirations for equitable, inclusive, and quality education. However,



implementation often fails short of these commitments. Structural challenges including insufficient financing, weak institutional coordination, teacher shortages, outdated curricula, insecurity, and socio-cultural barriers continue to undermine education outcomes, particularly among marginalized groups (Olanrewaju et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2023). This global-local disconnect manifests in several dimensions

Policy overlaps and fragmentation

Nigeria's education sector is characterized by overlapping mandates among federal, state, and local authorities, leading to policy incoherence, duplication of efforts, and fragmented implementation (Adebayo & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023).

Resource policy Mismatch: Despite policy commitment, Nigeria allocates less than 10% of its national budget to education, falling short of the UNESCO recommended 15-20% benchmark required to derive meaningful reforms UNESCO, 2023 World Bank, 2023).

Cultural and contextual Neglect: Global education policies often promote standardized models that insufficiently account for Nigeria's cultural diversity, linguistic plurality and socio-economic disparities leading to curricula that are poorly adapted to local realities (Tikly, 2020, Ahmed et al, 2024)

Equity Gaps and Marginalization: Despite gender equity targets in global frameworks, Nigeria continues to face significant gender disparities, particularly in northern regions where socio-cultural norms insecurity and poverty impede girl's education (UNICEF 2023, Adebayo & Ezeanya Esiobu, 2023)

Imported Policies, Indigenous Realities: The Relevance Deficit

The pervasive influence of external actors, donor priorities, and global benchmarks has shaped education policy trajectories across the Global South, often to the detriment of relevance, sustainability and local ownership (Tikly, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2024). In Nigeria, for example, donor driven initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education Programme, while contributing to access expansion, have faced criticism for insufficiently engaging with community stakeholders, marginalizing indigenous knowledge, and promoting curricular content that lacks cultural resource (Olanrewaju et al., 2022).

This relevance deficit manifests in:

- Curricula that priorities- Western epistemologies over African knowledge systems, languages, and histories;
- Teachers training programme that fail to equip educators with culturally responsive pedagogy or context specific teaching methods.
- Assessment models that emphasis memorization and standardized testing over critical thinking creativity and problem solving (Adebayo & Ezeanya Ebiobu, 2023; UNESCO, 2023)

Moreover, the reliance on externally driven policy frameworks risks fostering dependency, eroding policy sovereignty and undermining the sustainability of reforms (Tikly, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2024).

Contextualizing Global Directives: Towards Policy Pluralism and Localization

To reconcile global education aspiration with local realities. There is an urgent need to advance policy pluralism the recognition that diverse education pathways, grounded in local cultures, knowledge systems, and development priorities, are essential for achieving equity inclusion, and relevance (UNESCO, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024). Key policy localization strategies include:

Participatory policymaking: Engaging communities, educators, learners, and civil society in the co creation of education policies to ensure alignment with local aspirations and realities (Adebayo & Ezeanya Esiobu, 2023).

Decolonizing Curricula: Integrating indigenous languages, histories cultural practices, and knowledge systems into national curricula to promote cultural identity learner engagement, and contextual relevance (Tikly, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).



Contextualized Assessment models: Moving beyond standardized testing to adopt diverse, culturally responsive assessment frameworks that value critical thinking, creativity and problem solving (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Strengthening policy accountability: Establishing transparent monitoring evaluation, and accountability mechanisms to track policy implementation, resource allocation and impact (World Bank, 2023).

Enhancing Education Financing: Increasing domestic resource mobilization, improving budget transparency and leveraging innovative financing mechanisms to close the resource policy gap (UNESCO, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2024).

Nigeria's Path Forward: Repositioning Policy for Relevance and Equity

For Nigeria to translate global education commitments into meaningful, contextually grounded outcomes, bold policy reforms are required. Aligning policies with people's priorities: National education policies must be reoriented to reflect the socio-economic conditions, cultural diversity, and development aspirations of Nigerian communities particularly marginalized groups.

Bridging the resource policy gap: Increased investment in education infrastructure, teacher development, digital access and learning materials is essential to actualize policy commitments

Empowering Local Government Structure: Strengthening state and local government capacity to implement education policies effectively, with clear mandates and adequate resource is critical for decentralized responsive governance.

Institutionalizing Indigenous Knowledge: Embedding African world views languages and epistemologies within curricula can enhance learner engagement, cultural identity and relevance

Fostering Global local synergy: while global directive provides important frameworks, national policies must balance international benchmarks with indigenous realities to ensure contextual relevance and ownership.

Conclusion

The dissonance between global education policies and local realities underscores the imperative to reimagine education policymaking as a participatory, context driven, and culturally anchored process. By repositioning policies to reflect the lived experiences, knowledge systems, and development aspiration of learners and communities' education system can transcend the limitations of imported models and donor driven agendas. Ultimately, reclaiming policy relevance is a prerequisite for achieving inclusive equitable and sustainable education transformation in Nigeria and across the Global South.

Suggestions

This paper suggest the following:

1. Policies must be crafted not in donor boardrooms but in community spaces, co-designed with those they serve, responsive to local needs, and anchored in equity, inclusivity and sustainability.
2. Pedagogical reforms must elevate indigenous knowledge, embrace technological innovation and foster critical consciousness, creativity and collaborations among learners.
3. Partnerships must transcend transactional engagements, fostering authentic alliances, built on mutual respect, accountability and long-term impact. Through these pillars, relevance becomes not an abstract ideal but an actionable agenda for education transformation.
4. Reimagining relevance is neither optional, nor ornamental; it is urgent, unavoidable and untimely, the pathway to achieving inclusive equitable and globally competitive education systems. It demands bold leadership, brave reforms and bottom-up participation.



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