

THE INDIVISIBLE LINK: UNIFYING CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGICAL REFORMS FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIA

By

Tyonyion Richard Sughnen (Ph. D in view)
Instructional Technology, Department of Educational Foundations
Nasarawa State University, Keffi
tyonyion.trs@gmail.com
07038904712

&

Dr. Zakari, Muhammad Jamil
Federal College of Education (Technical)
Keana, Nasarawa State
muhdjamilzakari77@gmail.com
08065611378

Abstract

The issue of subject overload on learners in Nigerian primary and secondary schools and the request for requisite skills to overcome the challenges of the 21st century has been the concern of many researchers and education stakeholders over the years, in response to this the Federal Government of Nigerian has just introduced the new curriculum meant to address these challenges. This paper therefore analyzes the Federal Government of Nigeria's recent curriculum reform, which aims to align the nation's education system with 21st-century skills. While the new curriculum laudably reduces subject overload and introduces a focus on digital literacy and vocational skills, this paper argues that the reform is fundamentally incomplete. Drawing on a theoretical framework that posits the indivisibility of curriculum and pedagogy, we contend that the top-down, content-focused approach fails to address deep-seated systemic and pedagogical deficits in the Nigerian education system. Using evidence from Nigeria and cautionary tales from global case studies, we demonstrate that a curriculum-only reform will not translate into improved learning outcomes. The paper concludes by proposing a comprehensive, phased framework for an integrated reform that prioritizes teacher professional development, addresses critical infrastructure gaps, and fosters a collaborative, bottom-up culture of change.

Keywords: Curriculum Reform, Pedagogy, Teacher Training, Educational Policy, 21st-century skills.

Introduction

The Federal Government of Nigeria has embarked on a significant overhaul of its national primary and secondary school curriculum, a move that has been described as a future-ready framework designed to prepare learners with essential 21st-century competencies such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship (Ossai, 2025; Alausa, 2025). This reform has been the desire of many teachers and scholars for many years since the curriculum in use was unable to proffer solutions to the 21st century academic and global demands. This long-awaited reform, set to take effect in the 2025/2026 academic year, is a commendable effort to address a system long criticized for its reliance on rote learning and its disconnection from global realities (Akinlami, 2025; Nkanang, 2015; Odigboh, 2025; Tella, 2017). According to the Federal Ministry of Education, the new curriculum aims to reduce the subject load, streamline learning, and reintroduce vital subjects like Nigerian History while integrating practical, skill-based areas. The stated objectives are to revitalize the education sector, enhance the quality of instruction, and equip students to thrive in a global economy (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025; Alausa, 2025). However, a critical examination of this reform from the lenses of a teacher in the classroom reveals a profound disjuncture because, the policy is centered on a content-based overhaul: changing the *what* of education without a corresponding equally ambitious effort to transform teaching methods and address systemic issues that define the *how* of education. This paper posits that this separation is a critical oversight that will render the entire reform fruitless. The success of any curriculum is fundamentally contingent upon the capacity of the educational system, particularly its teachers to implement it effectively. It is a core tenet of educational theory that curriculum, teaching, and textbooks are not isolated components but form an *organic and unified whole* (Zhang & Wang, 2023). A reform that focuses on one element in isolation is conceptually flawed and, as this analysis will show, destined to underperform.

This study will first establish the theoretical foundation for the inseparable link between curriculum and pedagogy. It will then analyze the specifics of Nigeria's new curriculum, followed by a critical examination of the pre-existing pedagogical and systemic deficits within the Nigerian education system. The paper will demonstrate the fundamental incompatibility between the aspirational goals of the new curriculum and the entrenched realities of the classroom. Drawing on insights from both failed and successful international models of educational reform, this paper will conclude with a comprehensive, unified framework for effective and sustainable educational transformation in Nigeria.

A Theoretical and Global Perspective on Educational Reform

The relationship between curriculum and teaching is more than a simple matter of a plan being followed by an action. According to some theoretical perspectives, the historic conjunction of curriculum and teaching in the field of education is a historic mistake. This perspective argues that

this pairing institutionalizes a form of social engineering where education is treated like a machine that can be adjusted to produce predetermined outcomes, such as high test scores. The flaw in this model is that it places the responsibility for student learning squarely on the teacher, a phenomenon referred to as the politics of scapegoating. The overemphasis on teaching inflates the teacher's role, suggesting a direct, causative link between a teacher's actions and a student's learning outcomes, thereby holding teachers accountable for systemic failures. A more robust view shifts the focus from curriculum and teaching to curriculum and study, where study is a self-directed ethical process that cultivates individual judgment and enables self-formation. This is not to diminish the teacher's role but to redefine it from that of an authoritative instructor to a facilitator who guides self-engaged discovery (Pinar, 2012; Restorying Education, 2023).

The Nigerian reform, by largely focusing on a content-based overhaul without addressing the pedagogical and systemic context, risks falling into this same trap: holding teachers responsible for outcomes they are ill-equipped to deliver. The reform becomes a superficial exercise in social engineering rather than a deep, meaningful transformation.

Lessons from Global Case Studies: Success and Failure

The consequences of a disjunctured reform approach are not merely theoretical; they are well-documented in international contexts. The cautionary tale of Uganda's thematic primary school curriculum implemented in 2007 provides a stark parallel to Nigeria's current situation (UNICEF, 2018). Uganda's reform, like Nigeria's, was a well-intentioned effort to move away from a traditional, teacher-centered curriculum toward a more skills-based approach. However, the reform largely failed to change what happened in the classroom, with learning levels remaining stubbornly low (UNICEF, 2018). The reasons for this failure were attributed not to the curriculum's design but to critical implementation issues: teacher training was severely inadequate, poorly delivered and confusing, textbooks and prescribed materials were unavailable, and ongoing support and supervision were ineffective (UNICEF, 2018). The Uganda case demonstrates the predictable outcome of a flawed reform strategy where the impact of the policy remains at a rhetorical level and fails to translate into tangible classroom change (Au, 2011). This serves as a potent warning that Nigeria's current reform, if unaccompanied by a similar focus on pedagogical and systemic issues, will likely share the same fate.

In contrast, countries that have achieved notable educational success, such as Finland and New Zealand, have done so by embracing a unified, integrated approach. Finland's model is built on a *less-is-more* curriculum that is complemented by a deep trust in and autonomy for teachers (Restorying Education, 2023). Teachers are viewed as respected professionals and facilitators of learning, a fundamental departure from the authoritarian instruction of the past (Pinar, 2012; Restorying Education, 2023). Similarly, New Zealand's national curriculum framework is explicitly designed to guide pedagogy and assessment, emphasizing that teachers require ongoing

professional development and collegial collaboration to improve their classroom practice (The IAEG, 2018). The success of these systems is rooted in a philosophical shift away from centralized prescription toward decentralized trust. The Nigerian reform, in its top-down and rapid rollout stands in stark contrast to these models, which involve broad stakeholder consultation and a fundamental re-conceptualization of the teacher's role (Akinlami, 2025; Education Reform Initiative, 2023; The IAEG, 2018). These examples demonstrate that true transformation requires moving from a *teacher-as-receiver* to a *teacher-as-partner* model, where teachers are empowered and supported as co-creators of the reform, not merely as its consumers (Dejvid & Radosav, 2020).

Analysis of Nigeria's Recent Curriculum Overhaul: The What of Reform

The Federal Government's reform is an ambitious attempt to modernize the Nigerian education system. A primary feature of the new curriculum is the reduction of subject overload, with a significant decrease in the number of subjects across all levels of education; from Primary 1 through Senior Secondary School (SSS) and technical colleges (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025; Alausa, 2025). This change is designed to allow for more focused and functional learning. The curriculum also introduces a sharper focus on five core areas: Humanities, Sciences, Business, Trade, and General Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025; Alausa, 2025). A new compulsory subject, Citizenship and Heritage Studies has been introduced at the senior secondary level by merging Nigerian History, Civic Education, and Social Studies, while Nigerian History has been reinstated as a compulsory subject from Primary 1 to JSS 3 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025). Additionally, trade subjects for non-technical schools have been streamlined from over 30 to six practical areas, including Solar PV Installation, Fashion Design, and Computer Hardware repairs. The stated objectives of these changes are to ensure that Nigerian students are equipped with the skills needed for a rapidly changing world, including digital literacy, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship. This aims to improve the quality of instruction and provide students with the knowledge required to thrive in the global economy (Federal Ministry of Education, 2025; Alausa, 2025).

Despite these laudable goals, the reform's implementation approach raises serious concerns. The reform was announced suddenly, catching key stakeholders such as parents, teachers, private school associations, and even ANCOP members unawares. This top-down decision has been described as more political than educational, as it bypassed the kind of broad consultation that is critical for successful educational change (Akinlami, 2025). This approach is symptomatic of a long-standing issue in Nigerian education, which has been plagued by frequent policy changes, from the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1976 to the 6-3-3-4 system (Nkanang, 2015). Such policy instability creates a *here-we-go-again* phenomenon, leading to a sense of cynicism and a lack of sustained commitment that can undermine even the most visionary reforms (Au, 2011; Nkanang, 2015; Ossai, 2025).

The Pedagogical and Systematic Deficit: The How of Education

The new curriculum's aspirational goals are fundamentally at odds with the entrenched pedagogical culture and systemic deficits of the Nigerian education system. This is identified through the following:

- i. The Entrenched Culture of Traditional Pedagogy:** Nigerian classrooms have a long history of being predominantly teacher-centered, where instruction is delivered through lecture-style teaching and reinforced by rote learning and memorization (Bamidele, 2018; Tella, 2017; Odigboh, 2025). This pedagogical approach, a legacy of the colonial era, is exacerbated by practical challenges such as overcrowded classrooms with student-to-teacher ratios often exceeding 1:50, making personalized and interactive learning virtually impossible (Bamidele, 2018). The new curriculum, however, explicitly aims to develop skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. These are not goals that can be achieved through traditional, passive learning as they require a paradigm shift to learner-centered approaches such as active learning, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning (Ezeugo, 2018). A simple change in content will not magically transform a teacher's instructional approach from rote memorization to inquiry-based learning. This creates a direct contradiction where the *what* of the curriculum is in opposition to the *how* of teaching, rendering the new goals likely unachievable within the current pedagogical framework.
- ii. The Human Capacity Challenge:** The most significant barrier to the new reform's success is the profound human capacity deficit within the teaching workforce. According to (Odigboh, 2025), a staggering one-third of Nigeria's basic schoolteachers lack proper teaching qualifications, this is mostly found in private schools who are training the higher percentage of Nigerian students. Furthermore, an alarming 60 per cent of secondary school teachers do not possess basic digital literacy skills. This deficit is compounded by a severe shortage of qualified teachers, estimated at a shortfall of at least 190,000 at the primary level alone (Odigboh, 2025). This situation presents a fundamental dilemma: You cannot give what you have. The new curriculum mandates the teaching of Digital Technologies and other advanced, skill-based subjects but unfortunately, most of the schools do not have a single graduate of computer science among their teaching staff, yet, the system is asking a workforce that largely lacks these very competencies to train the next generation. The reform is essentially tasking an unprepared workforce with preparing students for a future-ready economy, a fundamental sequencing error that undermines the entire initiative. The critical and well-documented finding that teachers are the single biggest driver of student achievement highlights the urgency of addressing this issue before any content-based reform can be effective (Education Review Office, 2015).

- iii. **Systemic and Resource-Based Barriers:** Beyond the human capacity issues, the reform faces formidable systemic and resource-based barriers. Research highlights a chronic infrastructure deficit, with over 65 percent of schools lacking electricity and Internet access (Odigboh, 2025). This is not merely a technical inconvenience; it is a pedagogical roadblock. The lack of electricity makes it impossible to implement the new, technology-focused curriculum in a practical sense, turning hands-on, skills-based learning into another form of abstract theory. For instance, without reliable power, how can schools teach subjects like Solar PV Installation or Computer Hardware and GSM Repairs? The lack of a strategic, long-term commitment to providing these foundational resources can entirely undermine the new national policy

The Inevitable Consequence: An Unbridgeable Gap

The disjuncture between the new curriculum's goals and the system's capacity to deliver them creates an unbridgeable gap. The reform is at risk of becoming an overambitious and unrealistic framework, a common pitfall in developing nations (UNICEF, 2018; Kaffenberger & Pritchett, 2020). While the new curriculum laudably reduces the subject load, its focus on advanced skills without addressing the foundational pedagogical and systemic deficits is a form of over-ambition. This can lead to a situation where classroom instruction moves too fast for children to keep up, resulting in limited learning outcomes even after years of schooling (Kaffenberger & Pritchett, 2020). On this note it is very important to understand that what is often framed as teacher resistance to change is not necessarily a simple unwelcoming attitude but a rational and pragmatic response to a poorly managed policy. Sometimes resistance often stems from poor change management and inadequate consultation. The system is asking teachers to adopt new methods and content without providing the necessary training, materials, and/or support. It is not resistance to the *idea* of change but a rational apprehension toward a change that they are ill-equipped to handle, which is a critical distinction. A true and sustained reform must acknowledge and address this reality, empowering teachers as central actors in the process rather than passive recipients of a top-down mandate (Nkanang, 2015; Agara, 2016).

Conclusion

Nigeria's recent curriculum reform is a bold and commendable step toward a modern, skill-based education system. The reduction of subject overload and the introduction of practical, 21st-century skills are necessary and long-overdue changes. However, this reform is fundamentally jeopardized by a failure to acknowledge and act on the indivisible link between curriculum and pedagogy. Without a parallel and equally ambitious reform of teaching methods, extensive teacher training, and a strategic investment in systemic infrastructure, the potential of the new curriculum will remain unrealized. The evidence from both Nigeria's own systemic challenges and the cautionary tales of other nations demonstrate that a content-focused reform alone is insufficient. True

educational transformation is not achieved by changing a syllabus; it is achieved by empowering teachers, providing them with the necessary tools, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. The future of Nigerian education hinges on its ability to unify *the what* with *the how*, thereby creating a truly coherent and effective system for teaching and learning.

Recommendations

For Nigeria's curriculum reform to succeed, it must be reimagined as a unified, long-term, and collaborative project that addresses both *the what* and *the how* of education. To achieve this, we recommend the following:

1. Prioritize Teacher Professional Development and Empowerment

The most critical lever for raising student achievement is the quality of teaching. The government must, therefore, launch a nationwide, continuous, and mandatory professional development programmes that go beyond one-off workshops. This training must focus on learner-centered pedagogies, digital literacy, and the subject-specific skills required by the new curriculum. The government should leverage existing research that has already demonstrated the effectiveness of modern approaches like constructivism in the Nigerian context.

2. Address Foundational Systemic Gaps

A strategic and scientific approach is required for infrastructure development. This means a deliberate, long-term commitment to providing electricity, internet access, and instructional materials to schools, especially in rural and underserved areas. By providing the necessary tools and resources, it will create an enabling environment for pedagogical change can realistically flourish.

3. Foster a Culture of Collaborative and Sustained Reform

To avoid the cycle of frequent, failed policy changes, the government must shift from a top-down, political model to a more consultative, bottom-up approach. Policymakers, teachers, private school associations, parents, and other stakeholders must be engaged as partners in the reform process. A long-term, non-political commitment is essential to ensure that the reform is a generational project rather than a political talking point. This fosters a culture of trust and shared ownership, ensuring that the changes are sustained and effectively embedded in the system.

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