

Military Legacies in Nigeria Education Policies, Processes, and Quality: The Politics of Patronage in Nigeria: 1973–2003

Table of Contents

About this summary	1
Introduction	2
Incessant interruptions	2
Patterns of military interventions	3
Footprints of military interruptions	4
Positive Impact of the Interruptions	4
Disruption and confusion of the constitutional provisions.....	5
Policy summersault.....	5
Impact on the curriculum.....	5
Polarized perspectives and support.....	6
Financial irresponsibility.....	6
Teacher training and recruitment norms.....	6
Inspections, monitoring, and evaluation of basic education	6
Erosion of education quality.....	7
Conclusion	7
Implications for research.....	8
Implications for policy and practice.....	8
Implications for international development interventions.....	8
References	12

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About this country brief

The RISE Programme is a seven-year research effort that seeks to understand what features make education systems coherent and effective in their context and how the complex dynamics within a system allow policies to be successful. RISE had research teams in seven countries: Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Vietnam. It also commissioned research by education specialists in Chile, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, and South Africa.

Those researchers tested ideas about how the determinants of learning lie more in the realm of politics and particularly in the interests of elites. They focused on how the political conditions have (or have not) put learning at the center of education systems while understanding the challenges of doing so.

Each country team produced a detailed study pursuing answers to two central research questions:

- Did the country prioritise learning over access, and if so, during what periods?
- What role did politics play in the key decisions and how?

The full studies detail their analytical frameworks, their data, and sources (generally interviews, government internal documents and reports, and other local and international publications), and the power of their assessments, given their caveats and limitations. Country briefs extract from the full studies how leadership, governance, teaching, and societal engagement are pertinent to student outcomes.

Introduction

Nigeria's first 40 years of independence—from 1960 to 1999, when it finally returned to democracy—were dominated by military rule. It had seven military rulers, six changes in government inspired by the military (including five successful military coups), three unsuccessful coups, and one civil war. It also had four constitutional drafting experiments and four constitutions (one was never used), four transitions to civil rule, and two civilian regimes.¹ High government turnover produced multiple and frequent changes in education policies and economic development programs. From 1991 to 1999 alone, there were eight federal ministers of education across five regimes, with a further 11 ministers after the transition to democracy in 1999 until 2015.²

Under the preceding colonial governance, gender and regional disparities set in and became entrenched into the country's education system. Regional administrative structures established by the colonial constitutions promoted education as regional affairs, which further exacerbated differences in access and uptake. For example, the Southwest region established a Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme in 1955, which the Southeastern region also adopted in 1957. In the north, while there was a free education program, it was not formally launched as UPE.³ Conscious efforts to address the differential educational access between northern and southern Nigeria as well as the government's direct involvement in the establishment and management of schools did not happen at the federal level until the 1970s, about two decades after independence.⁴ In early 1970s, the Federal Government began to take over schools from private owners and made it a nationwide policy in 1975.⁵ This marked the full involvement of the government in the ownership and management of education in the country.

This summary presents findings of the Political Economy Analysis of Education in Nigeria, which focused on political intermissions during the first 40 years of the country's independence, which was dominated by the military. The study sought to understand how political breaks and interruptions such as the repeated coups and other government transitions contributed to altering existing administrative norms in the education sector, and the relation of these interruptions and their effects to the access and quality of education.

Incessant interruptions

The history of the post-independent Nigerian education system is thus a history of incessant interruptions and changes in policies and programs, informed by both political and economic factors. Table 1 summarizes the changes in political regimes and their key education policies and reforms.

Table 1 Highlights of political and policy interruptions and intermissions

	Highlights of key events relevant to basic education development
October 1960 – January 1966	Independence and the First Republic There were no major education policy changes from the colonial era
January 1966 – October 1979	First Military Era <ul style="list-style-type: none">● A civil war (July 1966 – January 1970) limited policy changes● Coups and countercoups produced governments with varying interests in education● A National Curriculum Conference was held in 1969● Nigeria moved from a four-region country to a 19-state country (the creation of states had a significant impact on education policies and programs at different times)● Schools were taken over from missionaries and private owners in the early 1970s

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Universal Primary Education (UPE) was launched in 1976
October 1979 – October 1983	<p>Second Republic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A democratic constitution included education in the concurrent list that allows all the three tiers of government to operate education ● An experiment with the multitier operation of education in the economic downturn proved challenging for the education sector
1983 - 1993	<p>Second Military Era</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The military sacked the elected civilian government and suspended the constitution that made education a joint responsibility of various tiers of government ● A Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) reduced government funding of social services, including education ● National and State Primary Education Commissions were introduced by a military decree
1993 – 1999	<p>The Interim Government and Third Military Era</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The interim government was short-lived with no noticeable impact on education policy and programs ● The third military era also had a limited impact on education policy and programs
2000 - present	<p>The Fourth Republic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Fourth Republic is credited with introducing the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program which led to various reforms in basic education, including new policies, the UBE Act, and various programs. (This study is limited to 2003, and most reforms were introduced after 2003, with the UBE Act passed in 2004.)

As the table highlights, different regimes introduced different policies. In some cases, educational policies were introduced and subsequently modified or entirely changed, even by the same political administration that introduced them.⁶ Continuing changes in administrations, which led to policy shifts, greatly affected policy implementation.⁷ Most programs initiated by each new administration were inadequately implemented by subsequent administrations, which introduced their own agendas.⁸ These changes largely reflected differing interests, challenges, and political approaches of different regimes. It can thus be concluded that political instability also produced instability in education policies, approaches, management, processes, and outcomes. Frequent changes and hastily introduced regimes, programs and political appointments left no room for in-depth program planning, execution, and learning. These also point to how military-led political changes did not mature but were imposed and without meaningful sustainability, responsibility, and accountability. Such changes eroded the structure, processes, and quality of education.

Patterns of military interventions

The study found that many of the military education policies did not seem to have been based on evidence-based needs, adequate planning, and evaluation of the cost. Instead, many of them were inspired by ethnic politics, political expediency, and quest for regimes' legitimacy.⁹ In these regards, the pattern of appointment in the military regimes that became entrenched in the Nigerian governance system exhibited features of nepotism, corruption, and the tendency to appoint friends and cronies into government. Muhammad and Liman argue that it was well-connected persons that were appointed into important offices by the military, and they were not usually intellectually equipped or suitable for such positions. "The ways and manners the military sometimes made an appointment to top posts in the public service made the mockery of public service rules and regulations governing appointments and promotions."¹⁰ The incessant changes in political leadership also led to incessant change of ministers and other important education officers, which

negatively affected policy continuity, the consistency of implementation and policy sustainability.¹¹ For example, Nigeria had five regimes and eight ministers of education between 1991 and 1999:

Within the eight years (1991-1999) that I served as Provost, the nation passed through five different regimes (Babangida till 1993, Shonekan for less than four months in 1993, Abacha 1993-1998, Abubakar 1998-1999, Obasanjo 1999-2007). Within this period I had to operate under eight Ministers of Education. The same thing happened at the state level. Each of the Presidents, Ministers, Governors and Commissioners had their different conceptions and policies on education that they tried to implement during their tenure. With such instability in the system of governance, coupled with constant changes in "Ministers of" "Ministers for" and "commissioners for," one should not be surprised at the level of the crises the nation's education system has witnessed over the years and the inconsistency and often contradictory nature of the educational policies and practices. It is one step forward and two steps backward.¹²

Another feature of the military intervention in education is the centralization of the education structure. The military used its command structure to centralize control of education. While this appears to have been remedied in the 1999 Constitution, centralized resource mobilization and allocation frameworks remain a critical means of control over other tiers of government. The military created and operated the federal education structures before handing them over to civilians in 1999. These structures have been typified by an opaque financial framework from the military, and any accountability that should have been gained through democratic checks and balances was lacking.

Footprints of military interruptions

The legacies of the turnovers remain a feature of today's political landscape and political settlement. These political interruptions altered policies, institutional norms, governance structures, and attitudes in the education sector, from 1973—a period after the civil war, when the federal government became fully involved in managing primary and secondary schools, taking over schools from missions and private owners—up to 2003 when the first successful democratic transition took place. Some of these legacies are summarized below.

Positive Impact of the Interruptions

Some of the major positive impacts of the political interruptions are the explosion of enrollment and school facilities and the increased number of teachers in primary and secondary schools.¹³ Generally, school enrollment in Nigeria experienced significant growth between 1960 and 2000. The credit for this goes to the military. General Obasanjo initiated and launched nationwide Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976, producing unprecedented growth in school enrolments and boosting the demand for teachers.

Primary school enrolment stood at 4.7 million pupils in 1973 and rose to 4.9 million in 1976, and under UPE to 6.2 million in 1977. By 1982, when the initial graduates of the UPE program emerged, the pupil population had risen to 15 million, having jumped from 12.5 million in 1980.¹⁴ Enrollments continued to rise until the Structural Adjustment Program was introduced. Primary enrollments fell from 14.6 million pupils in 1984 to 12.6 million pupils in 1988 before it slowly rose again and stood at 15.8 million in 1993.

Despite the continuing increases in school enrollment since the 1970s, when a truly national push to expand access began, learning gains have been limited. With about 60 million primary and secondary school-age children, both the access to and the quality of basic education have continued to present significant challenges.¹⁵ In 2020, an estimated 13.2 million children between the ages of 6 and 14 years were out of school, the highest number in the world. An estimated 12.6 million of them were in the northern parts of the country. And fewer than 50% of primary 6 students were competent in mathematics and English.¹⁶

Disruption and confusion of the constitutional provisions

The military set a precedent that confused the constitutional roles of various tiers of government, and created institutional, structural, and functional mix-ups within the Ministry of Education. Different tiers of government, ministries, departments, and agencies funneled their loyalty to the head of state. When a new binding authority permitted each level to operate according to its constitutional authority, issues arose in the education sector such as complicated and duplicative school supervision and monitoring systems that still bedraggle the system. Frequent changes in government also produced inconsistent and contradictory educational policies and practices.

The Constitution puts education in the concurrent list that allows different tiers of government to be involved in providing and managing education. In practice, however, both federal and state governments have worked against this. Along with the local governments, they established and operated education at all levels, from pre-primary to tertiary. They made their own laws and policies, some of which failed to recognize that education is a shared responsibility or to consider other levels of the government that were doing the same thing. This led to overconcentrations of efforts in some areas (school monitoring and inspection) while neglecting others (staff development and training).

Policy summersault

One outcome of these frequent changes has been described as a policy summersault. Babalola¹⁷ explains policy somersault as a situation of “consistent policy tumbles, flip-flops, turns over, or is abandoned midway” and this “can manifest in form of lack of consistency in, commitment and conformity to established perspective, policies, programs, and projects owing to so many reasons including misconception, mischief, manipulation, misfit, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, misplacement of priorities and misapplication.” The military interventions in Nigerian politics exacerbated the Nigerian experience of policy somersault that manifested largely in the form of a lack of commitment to policy consistency over time.¹⁸ The policies were not usually allowed sufficient time to mature before they were interrupted or terminated. Instead, the political climate created by the military coups is that of instability and inconsistency and had not been very conducive for policy maturation and continuity. Educational plans and policies were rendered ineffective because every political leader that came to power, both civilian and military, wanted to be identified with new ones.¹⁹ Consequently, the frequent policy changes and politics surrounding them have tended to negatively affect the policy implementation and ultimately contribute to harming the standard of education.²⁰

Impact on the curriculum

Instability in the government affected the standard of education by bringing about various changes in the school curriculum. The school curriculum was changed but personnel and teacher to

implement the change in the curriculum were not trained and were incompetent. The policy and curriculum failures were linked to politics and corruption, with policymakers using the school system to promote benefits for their relations and cronies. Policies, curriculums, and other changes in the education sector seem to have been inspired by the desire of those in power to pay off their cronies and/or provide avenues for enriching themselves. Each new regime wanted to claim ownership of its new policy and pave the way for making money.

Polarized perspectives and support

The literature and the qualitative data relatively create an impression of a unified perspective on the impact of military interruptions on access and quality of education, but the survey draws our attention to perspectives polarized along religious lines and between the north and south. Survey data revealed that the military governments' education policies generated different responses and possibly different support from northern and southern states and states with dominant Muslim and Christian populations respectively. In this way, education policies may have exacerbated divides rather than uniting the country. Northern populations were more likely to project favorable views of the military government actions and programs.

Financial irresponsibility

Military regimes advanced an excessive centralization of power and supervised the development of persistent patronage and rent-seeking tradition.²¹ Anyone favored by the political patronage system received some degree of immunity and could essentially escape punishment for most crimes, some involving money laundering and the unbridled theft of public funds.²² The military also entrenched an opaque financial system in Nigeria, including the education sector financing framework. Military ruled during the oil boom and oil doom as well and managed the education financing the way it wanted. Because it was neither responsible nor accountable to anyone, it became difficult for the citizens to understand what was happening in the education finance system and to demand accountability.²³ Many scholars²⁴ point to the corruption in the military system and nepotistic nature of the military, which provided an opportunity for the military finance managers to engage in humongous financial misappropriation and how the military did not care much about public opinion because it does not affect its opportunity for re-election. "In the military regime there is no constituency whatsoever...there is no question of being affected in judging cabinet members by how many people vote for them."²⁵

Teacher training and recruitment norms

The explosion in enrollments and the high demand for teachers were major challenges for Universal Primary Education. Anyone with some education who was interested in teaching was enlisted, and the emergency framework to produce and recruit teachers for the UPE had already been filled with people unqualified to be lecturers because they spent most of their limited academic time on theories of the subject and teaching tradition. In the 1980s and 1990s, teacher motivation and job satisfaction were low, and many who found themselves in the teaching profession had been pushed into it by their economic circumstances.²⁶ The image of the profession became so bad that some landlords would not let apartments to teachers for fear of their inability to pay rent.²⁷

Inspections, monitoring, and evaluation of basic education

The complications associated with military interventions, decrees and counter decrees, reforms and centralization are also evident in the Ministry of Education's inspection, monitoring, and supervision

structures. For example, the centralization of political administration under the military and subsequent creation of states weakened the state's capacity and independence. Two major factors informed the establishment of a federal inspectorate: the capacity of each of the 12 states to supply manpower and adequately fund inspection and supervision and to strengthen the state inspectorates. The states were mostly unable to provide a fully adequate service of inspection and supervision, particularly their primary schools.²⁸ For example, the Federal Ministry of Education's inspectorate division had only five of its 25 professional posts filled, and not until 1979 would the inspectorate be fully staffed.²⁹ And the monitoring and inspection frameworks did not extend to curriculum and instructional development.

The National Policy on Education (1981 and subsequent editions) specified continuous assessment to evaluate learning in schools. Operational in 1982 and seeking to curb fraud, malpractice, and other evaluation-related challenges, it gained some acceptance by the government and its agencies. But it failed to ensure that teachers would be provided the means of adequately and effectively addressing the problems that confront schools in carrying out continuous assessment in schools.³⁰

Erosion of education quality

The Military regimes' education programs, to a large extent, focused more on getting students enrolled in schools than improving quality because education policy was largely a tool to build a wider support base and rather than tools to maximize educational outcomes. The political expediency underlying popular education policies like the UPE and UBE overshadowed quality. The military government takeover of schools from the missionaries in the early 1970s marked the beginning of weakening the standards of education.³¹ The response was examination malpractices to help students reach the next levels, and the "educated" Nigerians who emerged from this process saw nothing wrong in encouraging corruption and malpractice—in schools, in the education sector, and in national institutions.³² The loss of faith in merit and fair play further eroded a belief in merit, and mediocrity and economic power took precedence over academic standards.³³ Examinations that should have determined access were fraught with cheating. Instead, given the need to obtain certificates from the already corrupt system, various cheating strategies were advanced by parents, teachers, and learners to ensure that weak students were certified as graduates.³⁴

Conclusion

The frequent leadership changes produced changes and shifts in policy and program focuses. Different regimes had different interests, challenges, and political approaches. Military-led political changes eroded the structure, processes, and quality of education. The attendant political instability also produced instability in education policies, approaches, processes, and outcomes, leaving no room for in-depth program planning, execution, and learning.

The military style of government introduced some opaque financial framework, which requires both conscious political will and civil participation to rectify. Rectifying it also demanded that political leaders must be prepared to take up the challenge of creating an open and accountable system. Mere policy proclamations may not be enough because the current UBE framework has a seeming accountability framework that fails to ensure accountability. Making it work for the country, for the education administration, and for the schools and pupils, civil society needs to push for an open accountability system, possibly using social media to expose unethical practices and failures to adhere to a new set of rules.

The confused structures and functions of various agencies of the Ministry of Education need to be addressed, not by creating new structures but by merging, adjusting, and restructuring the existing ones. It might help to learn from other agencies within and outside the country. The current confusions not only lead to ineffective agencies but also waste resources. Reforms should start with departments and agencies responsible for meeting standards and ensuring quality.

Implications for research

The centralization of the education system by the military is entrenched, widespread, and not limited to the education sector—and its ascendancy is observed in the political, economic, and other spheres. As the country has tested both regionalism and unitary-federalism, scholars should explore functional and workable frameworks that would promote inclusive participation and advance holistic development through educational development.

Many countries seen as relatively more developed today (France, Italy, Russia, Spain) were previously ruled by strong military dictators, raising questions for investigation: How did they become decentralized? How did they build an open, transparent, and accountable framework? What pathways and strategic actions did they take, and what were the key internal and external enablers? What Nigeria's peculiar challenges, and how might the citizenry overcome them to break down the opaque frameworks instituted by the military and oiled by the beneficiaries of the status quo?

Implications for policy and practice

Building a unified Nigeria requires policies and interventions that forge unity in diversity while providing tailored support to help educationally disadvantaged zones. Such policies and interventions need to evolve from a common dialogue and shared understanding of different needs of different locations, and that requires bringing together different voices and perspectives, including those heard during this study.

Promoting access without adequate planning and resources for high-quality infrastructure and qualified manpower needs to be addressed through conscious investment in quality, such as teacher instruction, relevant and adequate infrastructure, and training facilities in schools. In a society polarized by civil war and ethnic and religious differences, participatory dialogue that transcends elite bargains and payoffs can promote inclusive and participatory actions. Such approaches could accommodate different investments where they are needed without producing acrimony in other locations. Democratic practices thus need to be deepened at all levels to take back power from dominant elites who have used their positions to dominate the political space. Mass participation can be catalyzed in ways that will increase accountability, promote interventions matched to needs, and foster a sustainable, equitable, and industry-relevant education system.

Implications for international development interventions

Much early external financial support for the country's education system came from international bodies like UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, and the World Bank. And bilateral agreements between Nigeria and other countries—including Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—were directed toward supporting education. While these programs have contributed to educational development, the transformation has been slow, the education woes persist, and the access to education has worsened.

Supporting educational development in the North to help it catch up with the South is obvious, but development agencies need to consider the divided views that their interventions could produce or exacerbate. Their interventions need evidence-based justifications for choosing locations—made clear on project websites, and in documents and other public engagements including social media. Greater transparency can increase the effectiveness and improve the image of project funders and implementers.

Development agencies are working in a country where there is an administrative decentralization on the one hand and federal ascendancy in resource mobilization and allocation frameworks on the other. Interventions that seek to promote good governance, civil participation and even development need to study the centralization of the seemingly decentralized governance framework to understand how it affects their programs and how to mitigate the impacts on program implementation and outcomes.

Nepotism, corruption, and mismanagement of funds thrive in Nigeria's opaque financial systems. Donors thus need to incorporate public participation and open fund management in their funding criteria and ensure adherence to the guidelines. That can also expose the entrenched financial practices that pervade the Nigerian public system.

Patronage networks for employment and value allocation clearly weaken development efforts, grossly misappropriate development funds, and cover up crimes. Development assistance should thus address the tendencies and operation of patronage networks in donor-funded programs—and to break down these practices over time. The pattern of elite cooperation and conflict needs to be taken into account and the potential impact on education programs needs to be planned for before projects begin.

Annex 1 Indicators of learning for RISE countries

A country's learning adjusted years of school combines the quantity and quality of schooling into a single indicator by multiplying the estimated years of schooling by the ratio of the country's score on the most recent test scores harmonized to 625 (World Bank data for latest year of assessment).

Learning poverty, a combined measure of schooling and learning, is the proportion of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank data for 2019).

The Human Capital Index is the amount of human capital that children born today can expect to acquire by the age of 18 given the prevailing risks of poor health and poor education. It combines the likelihood of surviving to school age, the amount of school they will complete and the learning they'll acquire, and whether they leave school ready for further learning and work. For example, a score of 0.5 means that they will be only 50 percent as productive as they might be with complete education and full health—and that their future earning potentials will be 50 percent below what they might have been.³⁵

	Learning adjusted years of school	Learning poverty (%)	Human Capital Index (0–1)
Chile	9.4	27.2	0.7
Egypt	6.5	69.6	0.5
Ethiopia	4.3	90.4	0.4
India	7.1	56.1	0.5
Indonesia	7.5	52.8	0.5
Kenya	8.5	—	0.5
Nigeria	5	—	0.4
Pakistan	5.1	77	0.4
Peru	8.6	44.4	0.6
South Africa	5.6	78.9	0.4
Tanzania	4.5	—	0.4
Vietnam	10.7	18.1	0.7

Note: — = not available.

¹ Odinkalu 2001; Odukoya 2012.

² Gersberg et al. 2016.

³ Afigbo 1991; Fabunmi 2005; Azuma 2014; Ezegwu 2020.

⁴ Afigbo 1991; Maigida 2018.

⁵ Maigida 2018.

⁶ Oyedeji 2015.

⁷ Obanya 2011; Odukoya 2012; Oyedeji 2015.

⁸ Obanya 2011.

⁹ Igwe 1977; Ortner 2013.

¹⁰ Muhammad and Liman 2018, p. 46.

¹¹ Odukoya 2009; Obanya 2011; Gersberg et al. 2016.

¹² Odukoya 2012, p.13.

¹³ Osokoya 2010; Duze 2012.

¹⁴ Osokoya 2010; Duze 2012, p. 40.

¹⁵ UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2020.

¹⁶ Okoye and Adeniran 2020.

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- ¹⁷ Babalola 2019, p.3.
- ¹⁸ Babalola 2019.
- ¹⁹ Obanya 2011; Oyedeji 2015.
- ²⁰ Oyedeji 2015; Elechi 2016.
- ²¹ Amundsen 2010; Martini 2014.
- ²² Okekeocha 2013.
- ²³ Chikwendu 1977; Bienen 1978; Akinbuli 2013.
- ²⁴ Ukaegbu 1999; Muhammad and Liman 2018.
- ²⁵ Bienen 1978, p. 214.
- ²⁶ Ejiogu 1998; Ajayi 1997; Abe 2002.
- ²⁷ Abe 2002, p. 7–8.
- ²⁸ Pritchard 1975, p. 125.
- ²⁹ UNESCO 1981.
- ³⁰ Ali and Akubue 1988, p. 634.
- ³¹ Achinewhu-Nworgu 2019.
- ³² Achinewhu-Nworgu 2019, p. 169.
- ³³ Nwagwu 1997.
- ³⁴ Nwagwu 1997.
- ³⁵ World Bank Human Capital Index for September 2020.

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