Curriculum overload in Nigerian Junior Secondary Schools: Constraints to Quality Teaching and Learning Process

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Abstract:
The paper examines curriculum overload in junior secondary schools in Nigeria and how it is becoming a problem to quality teaching and learning process. It discusses the concept of curriculum and factors affecting the implementation of curriculum in Nigeria. It also addresses problems associated with curriculum overload which include denial of rest, academic workload etc. The paper provided solutions to curriculum overload ranging from merging related subjects, teaching more practical skills etc. The paper concludes that packaging the right subjects to face challenges of the future may allow for more progressive approach to teaching and learning which will transcend to hands on activities, experiment and projects in the classroom thereby projecting teachers as facilitators and transforming junior students into becoming early problem solvers. The paper suggests that Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council should intensify efforts on merging subjects. Merging should not just be a policy but ensures that subjects merged should be taught as one and Educational stakeholders should publish books carrying merged subjects.

Keywords: overload, curriculum, junior secondary, teaching and learning.

Introduction
Curriculum overload is also known as curriculum expansion which simply means the injection of new content items in the curriculum as an adjustment to new trends in the society without considering what needs to be discarded. It is the introduction of new areas of interest like digital literacy ranging from coding, Blockchain, financial literacy and understanding the history of the nation and refusing to remove that which is obsolete or becoming irrelevant (Majoni, 2017).

Meanwhile, the junior secondary school in Nigeria is embedded in the 934 system of education. This level of education is a gateway to the senior secondary education where students are prepared for university education. It is expected that at the end of the junior secondary, students are to sit for a qualifying examination that will lead students to the senior secondary
school where students can specialize. Over the years the Nigerian curriculum especially that of the junior secondary schools have been based on teaching students how to just read and write. The curriculum comprises more than sixteen subjects and students are expected to study these subjects in each term of three sessions. This hectic and cumbersome approach is becoming a burden to their learning outcomes. Students are expected to compulsorily listen or offer eight to nine different subjects daily meanwhile the focus of the educational system all over the world is the development of the human capital required to meet present and future challenges of globalization, knowledge and economy (Mathew, 2014).

According to Cambridge dictionary constraints simply means something that controls what you do by keeping one within a particular limit. It also refers to limit, restrict and avoid performing some action that may bring about development. Constraints in this context may mean challenge or to stand against meaningful development.

Generally speaking, quality in teaching and learning is seen in the way the knowledge and skills are passed to learners who are committed to it and ability of the teacher to utilize methods and materials to improve meaningful experiences for students. This is reflected when teaching impacts learning and learning influences teaching. Quality in teaching and learning is measured in its input, process, environment and output; if all these components are properly harnessed, teaching and learning are delivered in an excellent manner.

The thesis statement of this paper is hinged on the fact that curriculum overload stands against the path way for early specialization, creativity, innovation and problem solving skills of junior secondary school students in Nigeria. Solving the issue of jam packed curriculum is the responsibility of all educational actors. To realize this objective, the discussion in this paper will start by defining the concept of curriculum and then identifying the factors affecting the implementation of curriculum in Nigeria, address the problems associated with curriculum overload and finally stating the solutions to the problems of curriculum overload. Conclusion and suggestions will end the discussion.

**Concept of Curriculum**

Curriculum is a framework for guiding teaching and learning. It is referred to as a course of study and a totality of the learning experience of students in school. Curriculum must be designed to answer the following questions, curriculum purpose, curriculum framework, what new thing will curriculum bring, pedagogy and assessment. Curriculum should be designed in such a way that students’ generic skills are developed in their subjects and build student’s creative capacity. Curriculum should not be used for the sake of social needs alone but it should be a document that should foster students’ improvement and bring about merging skills to subjects as this will enable students’ applies their skills in authentic situations. Curriculum should not be designed for students’ literacy alone but for early specialization, technological advancement and critical thinking. Curriculum in itself is a child’s holistic development document (Priestly, 2019).

The 21st century curriculum should incorporate knowledge, thinking, innovation, skills, media, and information technology literacy and real life experience; these experiences should form the body of knowledge or core academic subjects. The 21st century curriculum should concern itself with development of knowledge and create an environment where students can reproduce the valuable and meaningful knowledge gotten to develop new skills. It is also imperative that curriculum be designed in such a way that students master knowledge and understand core academic discipline. Policy makers and educators should widen educational aims covering health, vocation, citizenship and ethical character instead of always embracing the narrow aims of producing students who will be economically successful as individuals and maintaining the economic supremacy of the nation (Halah & McGuire, 2015).

Curriculum is a collection of lessons, assessment, and other academic content that is taught in a school, programme or class by a teacher. A
standard curriculum should consist the following:

i. Purpose statement
ii. Outcome statement
iii. Essential resources
iv. Strategy framework
v. Verification method
vi. Standard alignment
vii. Course syllabus
viii. Projects.

A curriculum is a body of knowledge that a student is expected to learn within a given period of time. Curriculum should be about skilled focused programme that supplies students with wide and balanced knowledge of core subjects as well as effective critical thinking and communication skills (Stauffer, 2020).

Factors Affecting Implementation of Curriculum in Nigeria

Chaudhary (2015) stated that as genuine as the need to add subjects to the curriculum is, it is also important to guide against the inflow of periodic addition as the system is already jam packed which results to lengthy hours in school. The child spends most of his day in school so that teachers can cover their scheme. Studies have shown that the overwhelming curriculum injected into junior secondary school system in Nigeria most times lack professional teachers, possess jam packed time table and lack instructional materials to implement the curriculum. Due to the numerous subjects, students find it difficult to choose best subjects and combining subjects is a problem. Teachers in most schools in Nigeria have a lot to contend with in implementing the curriculum effectively. The teachers according to Ejike & Oke (2018) serve as the communicator between the curriculum planners and students and teachers are faced with a lot of challenges but for the benefit of this paper will mention just but few which include:

- High Daily Workload as a Result of Shortage of Manpower and Class Size
  
  Teachers are daily loaded with subjects as students are to offer 8-9 subjects daily and a particular teacher may be assigned to teach JSS 1-3. This affects effective teaching and learning as the teacher run in and out of classes without proper planning. This is one reason teachers don’t give project based and critical thinking assignment as they get so overwhelmed with work daily. In the Nigerian school system a private school may have 20-30 students in a class and public schools have over 50-60 students. This class size affects effective teaching and learning that can improve skills. For effective teaching and learning the teacher’s workload must be reduced to bring about improved methods of teaching that will groom skilled students. Students will gain more knowledge, retain more information and do excellently well when teaching instructions match learning styles. Due to the nature of curriculum the teacher finds it difficult to make teaching effective, teachers teach more of theory and use traditional teaching style where practical learning is absent (Sixbert & Oyango, 2022).

- The Absence of Instructional Materials
  
  The importance of instructional materials to teaching cannot be overemphasized and in line with the study carried out by Keshav (2020) it was revealed that learning cannot be concrete or meaningful if instructional materials are absent and that teaching and learning can only be effective if teachers teach students to visualize what they are taught or manipulate what they are taught in practical terms. The absence of instructional materials in our schools makes it difficult for teachers to teach especially science subjects effectively. It was further revealed that the use of instructional materials foster early specialization as the student begin to find a particular aspect of the subject taught with instructional materials interesting. For curriculum to be well implemented effectively teachers must use technological tools in making
lessons concrete which will increase student’s creativity and innovative skills.

**Qualified Teachers**

Implementing the curriculum demands teachers who are trained. In this modern day teaching students should be more of practical work, project based, group work to bring out the very best in all students. Translating theory to practice is what teaching in the 21st century demands to enable students become more skilled and innovative. Teachers need to be trained and retrained to teach students to be more creative and skillful. For effective teaching and learning teachers need to engage their students, grooming them to problem solvers and making them critical thinkers through practical work, collaboration and project based learning (Paul and Tendeukai, 2015).

**Problems Associated with Curriculum Overload**

Nigerian Educational Research Developmental Council (2008) felt there was a need to reduce the number of subjects from twenty to nine in what was said to be the new Basic Education curriculum. The change came into play from the findings of the study conducted by the council; the study revealed that the old curriculum was over loaded in terms of subject offered in the junior secondary school. Today the subjects are merged on paper but on the field or in the operation of the curriculum students still offer 16-18 subjects. Nothing has really changed in the nature of the curriculum the same old problem has remained. Stenger (2018) identified that continued introduction of new subjects is a major problem facing curriculum implementation in Nigeria. The problems of overloaded curriculum are numerous but we will list out few for the purpose of this paper.

**Long Hours of Staying in School**

Tim & Liang (2020) stated that long hours at school bring about unhappy students, parents and staff. A long day in school leads to frustration, tiredness and disappointment. It prevents children from participating in other activities other than their school work. It leads to low energy in school which may bring about distraction and reduced concentration while in class. It also translates into overworked teachers, teachers are over stretched as they have to plan the lesson, teach, and attend to other co-curricular activities. In Nigeria for example, students spend 8-9 hours daily with extra lesson inclusive 1620 hours in a year. Long hours in school can only result to attention deficit and poor performance in school. Children in the United States spend more hours in school than kids in countries in Asia, according to data compiled by foxnews.com in 2009. Children in the United States spend average of 1146 hours per year in school while countries like China, Taiwan, Japan and Indonesia spend the average of 900-1000 hours. Nigeria seems to have the longest time in school but find it difficult to produce innovators, critical thinkers that will solve future problems. It was reported that Asian countries with less time spent in school consistently outperform students in Africa and United States students in subjects like math and science which transcend to grooming innovators and producers. It simply means that the amount of time used in schools does not really bring about concrete learning and building problem solvers (Pedro, Francisco, & Ricardo 2021).

**Denial of Rest**

Muhammed & Abd Rahman (2015) stated that when a curriculum is overloaded, students may not have enough time to fully understand and remember the material they are learning. This can lead to stress, anxiety and burnout, which can in turn affect mental health and academic performance. Furthermore, the lack of rest may lead to fatigue and have trouble concentrating which can further impact their academic success. Lack of rest has negative effect on how a child learns. Tired kids work slowly because it is difficult for such students to remember what was just taught or what they just read. Their brains have a harder time focusing and difficult to recall long
term memories. Denial of sleep leads to distraction which result into careless errors and have a problem creating a stable mind to attempt classwork, other activities or test (Kanu and Simon, 2015).

Academic Overload
This simply means learners are exposed to excessive academic activities in such a way that they find it difficult to handle the pressure of so many subjects or work load. It is also when teachers try to cover contents in the syllabus and increasing information of what students are expected to learn at a given time which most times result to academic burn out and prevents students from participating in other developmental activities. This is common in the junior secondary school where over 18 subjects are offered (Eduwem & Ezeonwumelu, 2020). Teachers also suffer from work load as revealed by a study conducted by Scholastic and the Gates Foundation, the average teacher works 53 hours a week. Another study found that 78% of teachers feel they don’t have enough time to properly plan and address common core standards. Almost half of teacher’s report stress levels high enough to interfere with their health, sleep and quality of their work (Sharma & Mohua, 2022).

Solution to Overloaded Curriculum
With numerous problems tied to curriculum overload such as denial of rest, long hours of staying in school, academic work load and prevention of students from participating in other developmental activities like the co-curricular activities. The following according to OECD (2020) are ways workload can be managed.

Merging of Subjects
To solve the problem of curriculum overload, related subjects should be merged to reduce teachers and student’s workload. The nature of the junior secondary school curriculum could be streamlined to 9 or 10 to allow for early specialization. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council have made concerted effort in streamlining these subjects but in the practical sense these load remains. The best way to go about it is to break these subjects into two arms thereby introducing youngsters early enough to future problems which will lead to seeking for solutions early.

Table 1. Suggested Merged Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present JSS Curriculum</th>
<th>Science (Merged)</th>
<th>Arts (Merged)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Studies</td>
<td>English studies</td>
<td>English studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies</td>
<td>Physical and health education</td>
<td>Social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic education</td>
<td>Basic science</td>
<td>Civic education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security studies</td>
<td>Basic technology</td>
<td>Basic science (elective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Religious studies (to pick any)</td>
<td>Religious studies (to pick any)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian religious studies</td>
<td>Social studies/ Civic education</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic religious studies</td>
<td>Agricultural science</td>
<td>Business studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and health education</td>
<td>Computer studies</td>
<td>Home economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>Music, French, any Nigerian language</td>
<td>Music, French any Nigerian language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hausa (language of immediate environment)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Business studies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Home economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agricultural science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fine art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Music</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocational studies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
This merging practice according to UNESCO report of 2003 is necessary where learning content is the same or similar with minor variations as it reduces workload of students and teachers. Merging subjects is in line with international reforms as some subjects were recently repackaged into new groupings in countries like Scotland, Vietnam, Italy, Philippines and Northern Ireland with groups being formed from subjects seen as conceptually related.

**Teach More Practical Skills**

UNICEF (2018) have identified that there is a need for students to be exposed to more relevant knowledge for their future employment. The truth is that as the world changes and sophisticated materials are taking over the things students do by just reading and writing, Nigerian students may not have the basic skills they need to cope with the world of 21st century. The report further revealed that getting children into school and giving them a traditional education isn’t going to be enough. Teaching student’s practical skills gives first-hand experience and improves creativity and innovation which transcends to self-reliant and developed economy. Teaching practical skills makes merged subjects’ concrete as it is design to increase understanding, creates deeper impact, improve knowledge retention, familiarize students with tools and equipment that will be used etc. Teaching practical skills creates an atmosphere where students participate more in the teaching and learning process and also open up for learner centered approaches like projects, small group work, classroom discussion etc.

School’s normal curriculum is important for students’ livelihood but schools also need to give importance to practical skill subjects for their brilliant life. Practical life subjects will give students the vital grasp about succoring to live self-sufficiently. Schools should implement practical skill subjects in their curriculum to prepare students with aptitudes in order to present students that will provide solutions to world problem (Allery, 2020).

**Discarding Nice-To-Know Subjects**

Instead of introducing subjects that schools, and curriculum planners feel will be nice for knowledge increase, it is important for curriculum planners to forecast current trends in community life. Muxiddinova (2020) stated that forecasting predicts future trends and some of the trends that should be injected into curriculum are the business of crypto currencies, coding, and more sophisticated areas of technology and doing away with obsolete ones. Forecasting deepens and solidifies a nation’s curriculum and makes teaching and learning relevant and answers questions like what will education scenery be like in 10 years, what are those skills that will be sought for in the next 10 years?

**Implications of Quality Teaching and Learning for Junior Secondary School Students**

As stated above, merging subjects, teaching more of practical skills and refusing to stick to irrelevant and obsolete curriculum will promote creativity, innovation and create pathways for early specialization amongst students of junior secondary schools in Nigeria. The transformations these solutions bring will make up as implications of the discussion. This will be outlined below.

1. Providing relevant teaching and learning will definitely groom students to become the response to problems of the 21st century by exploring and utilizing the right skills and innovations to solve an existing problem.
2. Discarding nice-to-know subjects will create space for trendy subject areas like coding, crypto block chains, artificial intelligence in the curriculum.
3. Merging of subjects will reduce time spent in school which will enable students get
acquainted with other trades outside the school setting like tailoring, coding, music, art, sport etc.

Conclusion

Reviewed literature proves that curriculum overload has some negative impact as it increases academic workload, denial of rest and reduces the power of creativity of the junior students. Injecting too many subjects in the academic circle does not produce creative, innovative and self-reliant students rather it suppresses the pathway for early specialization and creativity amongst junior secondary school students. It is also evident that NERDC has made efforts to merge subjects but more subjects keep popping up like history, vocational studies etc. The numerous subjects do not seem to be the answer to the 21st century problems rather an educational forecast is needed to introduce relevant subjects or topics that will respond to the problems of 21st century. The junior secondary school curriculum should be planned to accommodate predicted trends just like the emergence of crypto currencies, coding, high technological applications etc. Packaging the right subjects to face challenges of the future may allow for more progressive approach to teaching and learning which will transcend to hands on activities, experiment and projects in the classroom thereby projecting teachers as facilitators and transforming junior students into becoming problem solvers.

Suggestions

It is hereby suggested that:

1. Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council should intensify efforts on merging subjects. Merging should not just be a policy but ensures that subjects merged should be taught as one.

2. Educational stakeholders should publish books carrying merged subjects.

3. Curriculum should move from traditional to progressive to allow for more hands-on activities, projects etc.

4. Educational stakeholders should regularly forecast future trends so as to inject relevant areas into curriculum and gradually discarding obsolete subjects or areas.

References


