

Unity Schooling in Nigeria: What Went Wrong?

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria established its Unity Schools, also known as Federal Government Colleges, to foster national unity by bringing together students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Originally highly regarded for their academic excellence and competitive admissions, these institutions are now struggling with declining interest and quality. This article explores the origins, purposes, and policies behind Unity Schools, tracing their development from their inception in the 1960s through various decades. It examines the decline in standards and the challenges contributing to this trend, including inadequate funding, insufficient qualified teachers, insecurity, and deteriorating infrastructure. The article also discusses the impact of increased regional accessibility and the shift in parents' preferences towards private schools. The article provides recommendations to address these issues, including enhancing funding, improving teacher quality, and revitalizing infrastructure. The decline of Unity Schools highlights broader issues in Nigeria's educational system and suggests urgent reforms to restore their role in promoting national unity.

Keywords: Unity Schools, Educational Policy, Nigeria, Teacher Quality, Funding Issues

JEL codes: I21; I28; O55; I26; H52

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds have led to the introduction of Unity Schools, also known as Federal Government Colleges, to promote understanding and tolerance among children. These schools, which are among the best public schools in Nigeria, aim to unite students from various regions within a single school. Each state has one or two Unity Schools, with Lagos State having four. The establishment of these schools aims to promote national unity and cohesion by uniting students from various regions within a single school. Nigeria's 36 states, as well as the Federal Capital Territory, host 115 Federal Unity Schools (Erunke, 2024).

Today, Unity schools are a shadow of what they used to be. Students in Unity schools used to beat their chests and come out on top at national competitions. Parents and other family members used to eagerly await the results of their wards' national common entrance exams into federal government colleges, now known as Unity schools. These days, many parents don't seem to be interested in Unity schools. The situation has gotten so bad that public officers, including government functionaries in charge of education at both the federal and state levels across the country, such as public school teachers and principals, now have their wards enrolled in private schools (Adesulu, 2010).

This article examines the origin and purpose behind the establishment of Unity Schools in Nigeria, highlighting the policies that supported their creation and the challenges that have constrained their effectiveness since their inception. It provides a comparative analysis of the state of Unity schools across different decades—specifically the 1970s, 1980s, 90s, and present. Additionally, the article explores the factors that have contributed to their decline and offers recommendations for addressing these issues to improve the performance and impact of Unity schools.

Origin

Before 1909, the colonial government in Nigeria did not involve secondary education. The missionaries established the first generation of secondary schools in the country, such as the CMS Grammar School (1859),

Methodist Boys High School (1878), Methodist Girls High School (1879), and Baptist Academy, Obanikoro (1885), among others, to provide secondary education (Fafunwa, 1974).

It was not until 1909, 50 years after the establishment of the first missionary school in 1927, that the British colonial administration established the first government-owned secondary school, Kings College, and later Queens College, in Lagos. The government established three similar public schools in each of the regions that made up the protectorate of Nigeria at the time, exactly two years later, in 1929. The three colleges, now known as Barewa College, are located at Government College, Umuahia (GCU), Government College, Ibadan (GCI), and Government College, Zaria (GCZ) (Adeosun, 2011).

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the federal government retained ownership of Kings and Queens Colleges while transferring the new colleges to their respective areas. The result was the renaming of the federal colleges in Umuahia, Ibadan, and Zaria as the Eastern, Western, and Northern regional government schools, respectively. With the Kings and Queens colleges in Lagos in the Western region, it wasn't long before the administrations of the other regions began to demand the formation of federal government colleges in their regions as well. Furthermore, Prime Minister Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, leading the then-Federal Government, recognized that the majority of difficulties in government and parliament stemmed from mistrust and misunderstanding of the backgrounds of those ruling the new nation. The political crisis that developed in the Western Region following the 1964 elections bolstered the government's image. Thus, in 1966, the Federal Government decided to create "Inter-Regional Secondary Schools," afterwards renamed Federal Government Colleges, in the original three (3) areas of East, North, and West. The schools were located at Okposi for the east, Sokoto for the north, and Warri for the west (Obasanjo, 2023). Each school initially equipped itself to prepare students for both the WASC and, later, the HSC examinations for those who qualified to participate in the two-year program.

In 1973, Gen. Yakubu Gowon's military regime began the process of establishing more federal unity colleges, with one in each state. In 1973, such schools were established in Ilorin, Ikot-Ekpene, Kaduna, Kano, Jos, Odogbolu, and Port Harcourt. The then-East Central State established a new school in the same year to replace the Okposi one, damaged by the civil war and re-established in 1995 (Adamu, 2015).

In 1974, the same administration opened all-girls federal secondary schools in Abuloma, Bauchi, Bida, Benin, Calabar, Gboko, New Bussa, Owerri, and Oyo. In 1975, the administration established similar schools in Bakori, Gusau, and Kazaure, and established a mixed federal government college in Ijanikin in response to requests from Lagos state indigenes for such a secondary school.

Purpose

The schools were not known as 'unity schools,' but rather as federal government colleges, or FGCs. After the civil war ended in 1970, there was an urgent need to reconcile the country and foster unity and national integration under the wide postwar policy framework of reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (popularly known as the three Rs). Several institutional frameworks were constructed for this purpose. One of these efforts was the transformation of federal government colleges into unity schools (Boss, 2023). The establishment of unity schools serves the following purposes:

1. To unite young boys and girls from various regions of the country, regardless of their social or economic status, to engage in education, recreation, employment, and communal living. This approach aims to dispel the enigmas surrounding the development of the regional population, fostering a cohesive family free from animosity, mistrust, or mistrust.
2. To create centers of academic excellence, providing a reliable source of well-rounded citizens to form the reliable assemblage needed to jumpstart the capacity building effort of the new republic and ensure positive growth and development.
3. To breed detribalized citizens needed for the good management of resources at all levels of the governance of the nation.

Policy

The federal government requires these institutions to admit students from across the country, allowing students from one region or state to attend school in another and interact with students from other regions. To guide school admissions, the education ministry devised a rigid quota system. This quota scheme admits 30 percent of students on merit, irrespective of their state of origin, and draws another 30 percent from all the federation's states, with a reserved quota for each state. Another 30% are drawn from the state where the school is located, with the remaining 10% admitted based on need.

A national common entrance examination led to the assignment of students from various regions to Unity schools in different regions. Parents found it easy to permit their children to attend schools in remote regions or states due to the various incentives offered. Incentives included free tuition, subsidized boarding fees, subsidized books, a to/from transport allowance for those living 160 kilometers away, the provision of special secured student coaches for those traveling by train, good academic and sporting infrastructure, and adequate and well-trained teachers, among other things. With such incentives, these institutions quickly became the preferred option for many parents. Even missionary and state government schools with boarding facilities could not compete with the federal government's incentives in the unification schools.

Due to the limited number of these unity schools, the competition for admission became extremely intense. This means that the individual states could submit only their top students to fill their quotas in the various unity schools through the national common entrance. State government and missionary boarding schools, all with rigorous academic standards, accommodated those unable to gain admission to the highly subsidized boarding and competitive unity schools. As a result, the unity schools, government schools, and missionaries' institutions competed fiercely for students. As a result, strong academic standards were achieved across the country, as well as mutual admiration, friendship, and bonding among students from other states, regions, ethnicities, and religions, which aided in national unity and integration.

Demand

In the early 1970s, governments in Nigeria's states took over all schools, including missionary and private schools, and turned them into public schools. The federal government's unity schools were the only ones unaffected by this takeover policy. In all government-run schools, the boarding house system was terminated. Some people's names were changed. Some changed their dormitories into new schools within the existing ones, while others established new schools on their grounds. They now had three or four distinct schools with three or four different principals. Even some government schools, which had boarding facilities prior to the takeover, eliminated these amenities and converted their hostels into classrooms or entirely new institutions.

Several parents, whose children were in boarding schools under takeover, had previously attended boarding schools themselves and desired their children to undergo the same educational experience. However, this development left such parents with no choice but to send their children to federal government-controlled unity schools that still provided boarding facilities.

The number of unity schools in the country was increasing in direct proportion to the number of states. Between 1976 and 1996, the country saw the establishment of 24 new states, including a federal capital territory, bringing the total number of unity schools to 104, with an average of three per state, including the federal capital territory. In Lagos alone, there are four unity schools: Kings College, Queens College, Federal Government College, Ijanikin, and Federal Science and Technical School, FSTC, Yaba.

The more states that were created, and the subsequent establishment of unity schools in those states, the closer the schools became to the people, and therefore the less the need for parents to send their children to unity schools in distant states to attend school. They would rather attend the nearby Unity School. However, due to the rapid increase in population and the states' governments' failure to provide adequate money for their schools, standards in state-controlled schools began to fall. As a result, there was a large influx of students to the Unity Schools. Consequently, the Unity Schools experienced increased strain on their infrastructure, leading to the onset of decay and a decline in standards (Okoro, 2015).

Unity Colleges in the 70s, 80s & early 90s

These colleges symbolized pride, privilege, and heritage. They were lavishly resourced, well-kept, and staffed with the best teachers available at the time. The various state governments intended to follow them as models. They developed men and women with broad minds from diverse backgrounds and cultures, united by a single bond of unity—the school tie—that transcends tribe and ethnicity, resulting in an upsurge in inter-ethnic marriages among their former students. Even though there are 110 of these schools, the students' attitudes, behaviors, and mindsets are strikingly similar.

Admission to schools was very competitive until the early 1990s, though students from each school's catchment area were also considered. The most important factor was merit. This assured that each college admitted the majority of brilliant students, resulting in a healthy academic competition that encouraged average students to raise their game. "The students' ethnic, cultural, religious, and social backgrounds were diverse, with students from wealthy and powerful families mixing freely with those from poor homes." Children from different socioeconomic backgrounds would attend the same public schools, play, and learn together. One could find a federal minister's child and the minister's driver in the same class. This exposure provided privileged children with an understanding of some of the difficulties faced by poor children, allowing them to have a more balanced outlook on life. Children from poor families would sit tight and study, believing that if they did, they would be as wealthy as their friends' parents and would not have to face their current hardships. There have even been instances where wealthy parents have stepped in to mentor their children's friends when their own parents were unable to continue their education. At that time, public school funding was reasonable, and teacher salaries were paid on time.

Teachers found accommodations both inside and outside the school premises, depending on their rank. As a result, the majority of teachers used their defined incomes to build houses in their villages. Schools were likewise well-structured and well-built. "We never heard or saw any building collapses or roofs being blown off by heavy winds." The structures were built to last."

What went wrong?

When it comes to secondary education, Unity Schools were once every parent's dream, but the terrible situation of the once-famous institutions of the first choice has eroded those dreams. For years, researchers, educators, and parents have wondered why the government has failed to provide the fundamental amenities required for a 21st-century boarding school. While many stakeholders are outraged by the dangerous position, the government is perplexed as to why parents appear to be losing interest in attending Unity Schools based on registration in the National Common Entrance Examination (NCCE).

The National Examinations Council (NECO) postponed the entrance examination into Unity colleges in 2019 to allow states with low candidate registration to enroll more students. This, however, implies that the figures obtained fell short of the government's expectations. Some challenges have led the Unity Schools to deviate from their original purpose and vision.

The Decline of Unity Schools and the Erosion of National Unity in Nigeria

Over the years, the number of Unity schools in Nigeria has grown exponentially. Once a dream for every parent seeking quality secondary education, the reputation of these schools has significantly declined. The deteriorating state of these once-prestigious institutions has left many wondering why the government has failed to provide the essential amenities required for a 21st-century boarding school. While stakeholders express outrage at the situation, the government remains puzzled by the declining interest in Unity Schools, as evidenced by dwindling registration numbers for the National Common Entrance Examination (NCCE).

In 2019, the National Examinations Council (NECO) postponed the entrance examination into Unity Colleges to allow states with low candidate registration to enroll more students. This decision underscored the fact that the number of applicants fell short of the government's expectations, highlighting a growing disinterest in these institutions. Several challenges have caused Unity Schools to deviate from their original purpose and vision.

The rapid increase in the number of Unity Schools has done more than contribute to their downfall; it has undermined the fundamental concept of national unity, integration, and cohesion that prompted their establishment in the first place. With at least two Unity Schools in each state, it has become increasingly difficult for parents to send their children to schools outside their immediate region. This geographical confinement deprives students of the opportunity to interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds, which was a core objective of these institutions.

Rising insecurity, poor road infrastructure, and unreliable rail transportation have exacerbated the lack of incentives for parents to send their children to Unity Schools in distant states—unlike in the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, Unity Schools have seen admissions increasingly concentrated in their local catchment areas, with many states no longer utilizing their quotas in far-flung institutions due to the availability of closer options.

The former Imo State is illustrative: originally, the state had two Unity Schools, but with the creation of Abia and Ebonyi States, there are now six Unity Schools within the same region. This expansion allows students from these areas to attend schools closer to home, reducing their original purpose as vehicles for fostering national unity.

Given these conditions, it is unlikely that parents from states like Imo would forgo the convenience of nearby Unity Schools to send their children to distant institutions such as Federal Government College (FGC) Kiyawa in Jigawa State or Federal Government Girls College (FGGC) Gwandu in Kebbi State. The absence of extraordinary incentives makes such a decision impractical. Despite the increased accessibility of Unity schools, the decline in quality does not encourage parents to send their children to faraway states. None of these schools offers a significantly better education than the others or neighboring private schools, further discouraging parents from considering distant options.

In light of these challenges, it is unrealistic to expect parents to risk their children's safety by sending them hundreds of kilometers across insecure and poorly maintained roads simply to fill a state quota. Today, the presence of a student from Imo or Abia State in a Unity School in Zamfara or Borno State is likely due to their birthplace, rather than their transfer from their home state.

When schools profile students based on their state of origin rather than their place of birth or residence, the situation becomes even more apparent. The concept of 'Unity Schools for Unity' is increasingly becoming a facade, as these schools no longer serve as platforms for the intercultural interactions necessary for nation-building. The failure of the Unity School system, when assessed in the context of the country's current divisive tendencies, reveals a troubling reality that calls for urgent attention and reform in line with the following:

1. **Funding:** According to the United Nations, Nigeria is one of the African countries that spends the least of its GDP on education (less than Somalia), with an average budget for education of less than 8% of the budget since 1999 and less than one-third of the 26% recommended by UNESCO for developing countries. Unity schools are also dealing with the non-remittance of budgeted funds. According to the honourable Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, only 36% of the monies budgeted for Nigeria's unity schools in 2016 were released. Out of the N13.7 billion appropriated for unity schools in 2016, only N5 billion was disbursed.
2. **Lack of qualified teachers:** The school administration, with the help of the PTA, has hired ad hoc teachers at pitiful pay. Some of these ad hoc or part-time teachers have been working for more than fifteen years without receiving a single naira increase. Some schools have more than 50 of them, and they earn between N20, 000 and N40, 000 each month. When there are vacancies for new teachers, most principals transmit the names of these adhoc/part-time teachers to Abuja; however, when the names are returned, they are made up of strange names, with the bulk of the new teachers lacking teaching qualifications.
3. **Insecurity:** This will not inspire any parent to send their 11–12-year-old child to a unity school far from home. Furthermore, the rise of private secondary schools, some of which are better equipped than federal unity schools, has given parents who can afford to send their children to faraway schools other options.

4. **Inadequate classrooms and hostels:** This is one of the most serious issues confronting Nigerian unity schools. Due to adverse constraints on learning facilities such as desks and chairs, library books, mathematics boards, laboratory equipment, and so on, Unity schools could no longer accommodate the number of students. When my set entered Form One at FGC, Okigwe, in 1985, we had five arms (A, B, C, D, and E) with an average class size of 30 students each. The school provided mattresses, plates for dining in the dining hall, tissue papers, dormitories, and class lockers at no cost, and you could visit the games store to sign for any desired game equipment. There was a reasonable breakfast of bread, tea, and stew, or an egg with butter, and perhaps Quaker oats as a compliment. There was also a reliable school bus. However, by 2021, the average class size had increased to 35, with nine arms (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I). It is now impossible to obtain a free mattress. We asked you to bring your mattress and dinner plate, as the school bus had become rickety and the games store's equipment had almost completely disappeared. Breakfast now consisted entirely of yam and stew. With the exception of FGC Okigwe, which now has porters, some of the children live in overcrowded hostels with overflowing toilets infested with maggots. In the majority of cases, students choose to bathe or defecate in the open. To ensure that the toilets and bathrooms are clean, students are instructed to bring disinfectants upon their return; yet, the facilities are unkempt, and some students defecate on the floor in the process. Despite parental support, the children are emaciated as a result of inadequate feeding. Some of the school dormitories and dining halls are as bad as prisons. Most schools are overcrowded, with a population of about 2,200 kids, pushing parents and guardians to opt for day schooling.
5. **Cost of Living:** This has been a persistent difficulty for most Nigerian parents. Because of the purchasing power of their income, parents are now spending more on their children's education than they did in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. Similarly, the cost of transportation, food, and clothing has risen daily. There is a definite relationship between parental income and children's access to long-distance school education as a result of the cost of living, which may be telling more on the parents as they could not afford to send their children to schools that are very far from where they live, regardless of the academic level the school offers. They may opt to retain their children in schools close to home so that they may walk to school or stay in a school where the cost of seeing them is not extraordinarily high.
6. **Teachers' Welfare:** It is important to note that any school that wishes to thrive and grow from strength to strength, to stand the test of time, to achieve its set objectives, and to increase the morale, effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and performance of its teachers must imbibe the concept of effective remuneration of its staff, as this will encourage teachers to do their best. Teachers' remuneration plays a role in delivering the necessary consequences to keep goal-directed performance on track. Poor remuneration will force teachers to purchase merchandise, which will negatively impact classroom performance. Some Unity school teachers commute to school and live in "I face you, I face me" apartments. Teachers work for nearly ten years without receiving any training or retraining. They do not have access to mortgages. Most teachers attend promotion interviews more than twice before receiving a promotion, not due to poor performance, but due to a lack of vacancies at their next level. The majority of vice principals are forced to work under their juniors, who have been transferred from Abuja to serve as principals.
7. **Discipline:** While this is not unique to them, most parents are disappointed when they learn that some Unity schools are havens for vices like lesbianism, homosexuality, stealing, bullying, and so on.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The federal government should come up with new incentives like flight tickets, free tuition, life insurance, and bursaries that will attract students from the south to go to the north and fill up the quota meant for the south, and vice versa.
2. The federal government should increase education funding to match the UNESCO recommendation of 26%.
3. Through the Ministry of Education, the federal government should hire more teachers while

simultaneously ensuring that only the best pass rigorous written and oral examinations. They should also ensure that teachers have teaching qualifications from reputable higher education institutions, such as Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education.

4. All Unity schools across the nation should bolster security, and their curricula should incorporate security awareness. The curriculum should integrate security awareness from JSS 1 to JSS 3.
5. The government should solve the issues of inadequate classrooms and dilapidated furniture, as well as provide electricity, water, and unfinished projects in Unity colleges, and form a commission to oversee the system.
6. Teachers should have a separate cadre from the ministry, such as Education Officers I and II, Senior Education Officers, Principal Education Officers, Chief Education Officers, Assistant Directors, Deputy Directors, and Directors. The government should implement something new, such as Master I, II, III, Senior Master, Principal Master, and Chief Master.
7. The government should establish a separate commission from the ministry to oversee Unity schools, similar to NUC and NCCE.
8. The positions held by Unity School principals should be tenured. Perhaps after five years of a single tenure, the individual should either redeploy to the newly formed commission or continue as a classroom teacher, similar to vice chancellors, provosts, and rectors, provided they do not retire before the end of their term.
9. The government should fully implement the newly approved teacher incentives.

CONCLUSION

To address the deteriorating conditions in Unity Schools and prevent further widening of the educational gap between the wealthy and the poor, urgent reforms are required. Improving infrastructure, teacher quality, and overall educational standards will be crucial in restoring the school's role in fostering national unity and integration.

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