International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 08 Issue 09 September 2025

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v8-i9-30, Impact factor- 8.007

Page No: 6973-6978

Rethinking Education in Nigeria: Curriculum Reform, Teacher Preparedness and Student Engagement in Digital Age

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ABSTRACT: Nigeria's education system faces a critical moment with outdated curricula, inconsistent teacher preparedness, and uneven student engagement which hinders its ability to meet 21st-century demands. This article examines the interconnected nature of curriculum reform, teacher capacity, and student engagement in the digital age and argues that sustainable transformation requires an integrated approach supported by robust policy and systemic investment.

The paper emphasizes the importance of aligning government funding priorities, teacher professional development and digital literacy integration from early education. It also calls for active participation from educators, parents, communities, and the private sector to bridge the digital divide and foster innovation. The vision is a Nigeria where every learner gains both locally relevant competencies and globally competitive skills, turning the country's demographic advantage into a driver of inclusive prosperity.

KEYWORDS: Education reform, Curriculum development, Teacher preparedness, Student engagement, Digital learning, ICT in education.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas of the country are well known for their substandard education system, where students only have access to outdated textbooks, a system where teachers engage the students with outdated lessons designed decades ago. On the other hand, are students in private schools who have access to top notch facilities, updated curriculums and good learning environment. This stark contrast encapsulates Nigeria's education crisis which is a system struggling to bridge the gap between its current state and the demands of the 21st century. With over 20 million children out of school, Nigeria faces a monumental challenge in educating its burgeoning youth population (UNESCO, 2023). The nation's education landscape is marked by uneven quality, a persistent digital divide, and curricula that often fail to equip students with relevant skills. Yet, the future of Nigerian education holds promise, hinging on reimagining curricula, empowering teachers, and fostering student engagement through technology-driven strategies.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, boasts a youth population of over 100 million, a demographic dividend that could propel economic growth if harnessed effectively (World Bank, 2024). However, the education system is plagued by disparities. Urban schools often have better resources, while rural ones' grapple with dilapidated infrastructure and teacher shortages. The digital divide further exacerbates inequities, with only 28% of rural schools having access to reliable internet compared to 65% in urban areas (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2025). As the global economy shifts toward technology and innovation, Nigeria's education system must evolve to prepare its youth for a competitive future. This article explores the transformative potential of modernized curricula, empowered educators, and technology-driven engagement to close this gap.

Nigeria's current curricula has often criticized as outdated prioritizes rote learning over critical thinking and practical skills (Edugist, 2024). A Palladium Group report notes that over 50% of Nigerian youth face unemployment due to a mismatch between education and job market needs (Vanguard, 2025). To address this, the Nigerian government is rolling out a new basic education curriculum in 2025, emphasizing skills acquisition, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship (Sarumi, 2024). This curriculum aims to equip students with at least two marketable skills by graduation, fostering self-reliance and employability. For instance, integrating coding and robotics into secondary education could prepare students for tech-driven careers, aligning with global demands.

Technology holds immense potential to transform Nigeria's education landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of e-learning platforms like uLesson and Edukoya, which offer accessible, personalized learning (Oluwatade, 2024). These platforms have reached millions, particularly in urban areas, but the digital divide remains a barrier. In rural Borno, for instance, students trek kilometers to access internet cafes for online lessons, highlighting the need for infrastructure investment. Government programs like NITDA's 3MTT aim to train 3 million youths in digital skills by 2027 but success hinges on bridging the digital divide through affordable devices and reliable internet.

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The Urgency for Educational Reform in Nigeria

In a world where knowledge evolves at breakneck speed, education systems must keep pace to prepare students for the future. Nigeria with its vibrant youth population and immense potential, stands at a critical juncture. Globalization has turned the world into a tightly knit village where ideas, economies, and technologies flow seamlessly across borders. This interconnectedness demands a workforce that is equipped with critical thinking, adaptability, and digital fluency. Automation and AI are reshaping industries from agriculture to finance which renders repetitive tasks obsolete and elevating the need for skills like problem-solving, creativity, and data analysis. According to Frey and Osborne (2017), 47% of jobs in developed economies are at risk of automation and this is a trend that is rapidly spreading to emerging markets like Nigeria. Education systems worldwide are responding by integrating STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), coding, and soft skills into curricula to prepare students for dynamic economies.

Current Gaps in Nigeria's Curriculum

Nigeria's curriculum, particularly at the basic and secondary levels, is rooted in a colonial-era framework that prioritizes rote memorization over learning. Subjects like mathematics and science often emphasize theoretical concepts without practical applications which leaves students ill-prepared for real-world challenges (Okebukola, 2020). For instance, a chemistry syllabus might focus on memorizing the periodic table but neglect laboratory experiments due to resource constraints. This disconnect is stark in a world where industries demand problem solving skills.

Entrepreneurship and soft skills, such as communication and teamwork are also underrepresented. In a country with high youth unemployment rate of about 33% according to the National Bureau of Statistics, 2023, the absence of entrepreneurial education is a missed opportunity. I remember speaking with a recent graduate here in Abeokuta during her youth service year who felt her education left her unprepared for the job market which has forced her into to learning a skill at the end of the day. Stories highlight like this requires urgency for reform.

A 21st-century curriculum for Nigeria must be forward-thinking, inclusive, and adaptable. Here are key principles to guide its development:

1. Relevance to Global and Local Needs: The curriculum should align with global trends, such as automation and AI, while addressing Nigeria's unique economic and cultural context. For example, integrating agribusiness education can empower students in Nigeria's agrarian economy while teaching coding prepares them for the global tech industry.
2. Focus on Skills Over Content: Prioritize critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity over rote learning. Project-based learning, where students tackle real-world problems, can foster these skills. For instance, a project on designing low-cost irrigation systems could blend science, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.
3. Digital and Technological Integration: Every student should gain foundational skills in coding, data analysis, and digital literacy. Models like Rwanda's coding curriculum, which embeds computational thinking from primary school, offer inspiration (World Bank, 2023).
4. Inclusivity and Equity: The curriculum must accommodate diverse learners, including those in rural areas and with disabilities. Localized content, such as teaching in indigenous languages at early stages, can enhance accessibility.
5. Lifelong Learning Mindset: Encourage adaptability and continuous learning to prepare students for a dynamic world. This includes teaching students how to learn independently through online platforms and critical evaluation of information.

Teacher Preparedness: The Teacher as a Change Agent

Teachers are more than knowledge transmitters, they are catalysts for progress and they prepare students for a complex, interconnected world. As change agents, teachers adapt curricula to reflect diverse perspectives, integrate innovative pedagogies, and advocate for systemic improvements. For instance, a teacher in a rural school might introduce project-based learning to connect academic content to students' lived experiences, sparking curiosity and resilience. By modeling adaptability and empathy, teachers empower students to navigate challenges and contribute meaningfully to society. Their role extends beyond classrooms they play a major role in influencing policies, community engagement and educational equity (Darling-Hammond, 2020).

Current Barriers

Despite their pivotal role teachers, teachers also face significant obstacles. One major barrier is inadequate professional development. Many educators lack access to ongoing, high-quality training that addresses modern classroom demands, such as integrating artificial intelligence or addressing mental health needs (OECD, 2023). Another obstacle they face is resource constraints and this mostly occurs in underfunded schools, and this limits access to technology and materials, hindering innovation. Additionally, bureaucratic systems often stifle teacher autonomy, leaving them feeling undervalued or micromanaged. Burnout is another pressing issue, with 44% of teachers reporting high stress levels due to workload and lack of support (National Education Association, 2022). These barriers not only diminish teacher morale but also impede their ability to act as transformative agents.

Strategies for Empowerment

Empowering teachers requires a multifaceted approach. First, professional development must be prioritized. Schools should invest in continuous training programs that are practical, relevant, and tailored to local contexts. For example, workshops on culturally responsive teaching can equip educators to address diverse student needs effectively (Gay, 2018). Second, fostering collaborative networks allows teachers to share best practices and innovate collectively. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have proven effective in building teacher confidence and creativity (DuFour & Eaker, 2019). Third, providing emotional and administrative support is crucial. School leaders can reduce burnout by offering mentorship, flexible workloads, and mental health resources. Finally, amplifying teacher voices in policy-making ensures their insights shape educational reforms, enhancing their agency (Fullan, 2021).

Student Engagement in the Digital Age

Today's Nigerian learner is often far more digitally exposed than the education system assumes. Even in low-income urban neighborhoods, teenagers frequently navigate social media, mobile gaming, and YouTube tutorials with fluency. A 2024 report from DataReportal indicates that Nigeria has over 103 million internet users, with mobile connections accounting for over 90% of online access (DataReportal, 2024). For many students, the smartphone is the first and sometimes only computer they will use in their formative years.

However, this informal digital fluency does not necessarily translate into structured digital literacy. Many students can scroll, share, and stream, but have limited experience with productivity software, coding, digital research, or online safety principles (GSMA, 2024). This gap reflects an education system that largely sidelines formal ICT education, especially at the primary and junior secondary levels, and where "computer studies" when offered, often consists of theory without hands-on access to devices.

The Nigerian learner is thus a paradox: tech-curious, socially connected, and culturally adaptive, yet underserved by formal training that could channel this digital energy into problem-solving, innovation, and employability.

Case Studies and Best Practices

Effective education reform in the digital age benefits from learning not only from theory but also from practical, tested models. Across Nigeria, Africa, and the wider world, several initiatives demonstrate how curriculum reform, teacher preparedness, and student engagement can align to create lasting change.

A. Successful Nigerian Pilot Programs

1. EdoBEST (Edo Basic Education Sector Transformation)

Launched in 2018, the EdoBEST programme in Edo State has become one of Nigeria's most widely studied education reforms. Combining teacher training, technology integration, and curriculum delivery, EdoBEST equips teachers with tablets preloaded with lesson plans, assessment tools, and multimedia resources. These devices allow real-time lesson delivery and track student performance, enabling data-driven decision-making (World Bank, 2023). Since implementation, independent evaluations have reported improvements in literacy and numeracy, particularly in rural areas where instructional quality was historically low. The program's success stems from its holistic approach technology alone is not the centerpiece; it is embedded within structured pedagogy and supported by continuous teacher mentoring.

2. NELEX Digital Skills for Youth

The National Electronic Labour Exchange (NELEX), under Nigeria's Ministry of Labour, has piloted a youth-focused digital skills training program in several states. Targeting secondary school leavers and unemployed graduates, the initiative offers training in coding, digital marketing, and ICT fundamentals. Graduates are linked to internship placements, improving their employability and entrepreneurship potential (Ministry of Labour, 2024). Though still small in scale, NELEX's approach demonstrates how digital skills can be integrated into broader workforce development strategies, bridging the school-to-work gap.

B. Other African Nations

1. Rwanda's ICT in Education Strategy

Rwanda's education system has undergone a major digital transformation since the mid-2000s. The government's ICT in Education Policy aims to integrate technology into all levels of schooling, guided by three pillars: infrastructure, teacher capacity building, and locally relevant digital content (Gatera & Ponciano, 2022).

Key initiatives include:

- Smart Classrooms: Equipped with laptops, projectors, and internet access.
- Teacher ICT Certification: All teachers are required to attain a baseline ICT competency.
- Local Content Development: Digital learning materials in Kinyarwanda to complement global resources.

By 2023, Rwanda had connected over 60% of public schools to electricity and the internet, a figure that continues to rise. The emphasis on teacher capacity not just hardware offers a valuable lesson for Nigeria, where device distribution often outpaces teacher readiness.

2. Kenya's Digital Literacy Programme (DLP)

Kenya's DLP, launched in 2016, distributed over one million devices to public primary schools and trained thousands of teachers in digital instruction methods (Kenya Ministry of ICT, 2023). While initial phases faced challenges with maintenance and

connectivity, later iterations incorporated solar power solutions for rural schools and partnerships with local repair workshops. Kenya's experience highlights the importance of lifecycle planning, ensuring that devices remain functional and useful beyond the initial distribution period.

C. Global Benchmarks Adaptable to Nigeria

1. Estonia's Digital Education Model

Estonia is often cited as the world's most digitally advanced education system. From early primary school, students engage in coding, digital citizenship, and online collaboration. The government provides universal broadband, free e-learning platforms, and a robust teacher training pipeline for digital pedagogy (OECD, 2023).

What Nigeria can adapt:

- National Digital Skills Curriculum: Integrated from primary school.
- Open Educational Resources (OER): Free, locally adapted digital textbooks and lessons.
- Centralised Teacher Support Portals: Providing continuous access to resources and peer networks.

2. Singapore's ICT Masterplan for Education

Singapore's sustained investment in its ICT Masterplan since the late 1990s has created a tech-rich learning environment where teachers are not just technology users but instructional designers (Chong et al., 2022). Schools receive autonomy to experiment with pedagogical innovations, supported by government grants and research partnerships.

Nigeria can draw from Singapore's model by:

- Providing seed funding for school-level innovation projects.
- Establishing research collaborations between universities and schools to test new EdTech approaches.
- Ensuring technology adoption is accompanied by curriculum alignment and teacher empowerment.
- Nigeria's educational transformation requires a holistic approach where curriculum reform, teacher preparedness, and student engagement work in synergy. A curriculum that builds critical thinking and digital skills is ineffective without well-trained teachers, just as strong pedagogy cannot thrive without engaging, technology-supported learning environments.
- Successful models such as EdoBEST in Nigeria, Rwanda's ICT in Education strategy, and Singapore's ICT Masterplan, demonstrate that aligning policy, capacity building, and infrastructure yields measurable results (World Bank, 2023; Gatera & Ponciano, 2022; Chong et al., 2022). For Nigeria, this means prioritising equitable funding, scaling teacher training, and embedding digital literacy from early schooling.
- Reform demands collective responsibility. Government must provide strategic investment and policy continuity; educators must embrace continuous professional growth; parents and communities should foster curiosity and responsible technology use; private sector and NGOs can bridge gaps in infrastructure and training. Students, in turn, must see learning as a tool for agency and innovation.
- With decisive, coordinated action, Nigeria can equip its youth for both local problem-solving and global competitiveness, turning its demographic advantage into a driver of inclusive prosperity (UNESCO, 2024). The time to act is now.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria's educational transformation requires a holistic approach where curriculum reform, teacher preparedness, and student engagement work in synergy. A curriculum that builds critical thinking and digital skills is ineffective without well-trained teachers, just as strong pedagogy cannot thrive without engaging technology-supported learning environments.

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