



Philosophical Appraisal of Curriculum Design as Nigeria's Educational Social Contract: A Systematic Review

Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu^{1*} , Lasbrey Ikechukwu Unegbu², Godson Chidi Nwokorie³, Sule Omeiza Adebayo⁴

¹ Department of Philosophy of Education, Imo state University, Imo State, Nigeria

² Department of Early Childhood Care and Education, National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Nigeria

³ Benjamin Uwajumogu College of Education, Imo State, Nigeria

⁴ School of Arts & Social Sciences, National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Nigeria

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: April 30, 2026

Revised: August 7, 2026

Accepted: August 13, 2026

Published: August 31, 2026

KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy;
Curriculum design;
Decolonial education;
Democratic pedagogy;
Educational social contract;
Epistemic justice;
Knowledge hierarchies

ABSTRACT

Background: Curriculum design in Nigeria is usually treated as a technical administrative task, yet it represents the foundational commitments of the state under its educational social contract. **Objective:** This systematic review evaluates whether contemporary Nigerian curriculum design fulfills the epistemic obligations owed to citizens using social contract theory. **Method:** Guided by PRISMA principles, a search across seven databases identified 62 relevant publications from 2017 to 2026. Forty core sources underwent full thematic synthesis, while 22 sources provided theoretical framing. **Results:** Five analytical themes emerged: the widespread policy practice gap, persistent colonial knowledge hierarchies, epistemic flaws in language policies, tensions between democratic ideals and transmission pedagogy, and the interdependence of curriculum, assessment, teacher education, and language reform. **Conclusion:** The failure of the Nigerian educational social contract is structural and philosophical rather than administrative. Successive post independence revisions remain symbolic, preserving inherited colonial epistemologies. Sustainable reform demands systemic epistemological reconstruction, additive multilingualism, and transformed pedagogical practice. **Contribution:** This study introduces epistemic obligation as a vital dimension of state responsibility, shifting the curriculum reform paradigm in post colonial contexts from simple policy revision toward fundamental epistemological reconstruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the relationship between a state and its citizens finds its most profound expression in the field of education, which serves as a foundational moral commitment to human formation and societal development. Across modern nations, this commitment is translated into practice through curriculum design, representing the deliberate selection, sequencing, and legitimation of knowledge, skills, and values deemed necessary for successive generations

* **Corresponding Author:** Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu, nwachukwuemmanue@gmail.com

Department of Philosophy of Education, Imo state University, Nigeria

Address: G23V+WFF, Samek Rd, Owerri 460108, Imo, Nigeria

How to Cite this Article:

Nwachukwu, E. L., Unegbu, L. I., Nwokorie, G. C., & Adebayo, S. O. (2026) Philosophical Appraisal of Curriculum Design as Nigeria's Educational Social Contract: A Systematic Review. *Indonesian Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.64420/ijitl.v3i2.566>



of learners. Ideally, the implicit or explicit agreement underpinning this political authority constitutes an educational social contract, a framework of reciprocal obligations classically elaborated by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau, and extended by scholars in educational philosophy (Toukan & Tawil, 2024; Desjardins et al., 2023; Ashwin, 2022). In this ideal state, the government commits to equipping citizens with the requisite knowledge, values, and economic opportunities for meaningful participation, while learners bear a civic responsibility to apply their education toward national advancement, ethical democracy, and overall political and economic growth (Locatelli, 2024).

However, real world practice presents a stark contrast to these theoretical ideals, particularly within Nigeria, where the fulfillment of this contract is deeply strained by colonial inheritance, post independence nation building ambitions, persistent economic pressures, and tensions between global practices and local traditions (Ignatius, 2022; Oluwalola et al., 2022). Despite successive revisions to the National Policy on Education, most recently in 2013, a persistent gap remains between policy promises and practical curriculum delivery, creating a systemic and ongoing breach of the educational social contract in field conditions.

A review of previous literature exclusively reveals that post colonial educational reforms often attempt to align national development goals with inherited colonial systems, as demonstrated in recent African educational analyses (Ofori et al., 2024). Other studies also discover that navigating philosophical curriculum reform in developing post colonial environments presents widespread structural and ideological challenges across diverse contexts (Sapto et al., 2022). Taken together, the results of these studies indicate that while structural policy updates are frequently documented, the underlying philosophical commitments embedded within national curriculum frameworks remain heavily fragmented and insufficiently analyzed.

Although various studies have extensively examined post colonial educational reform and social contract theory, most prior studies still address these aspects separately and have not provided a comprehensive picture regarding the philosophical commitments embedded in Nigerian curriculum design. Furthermore, previous studies have not sufficiently touched upon the unrevealed phenomenon of how specific policy promises directly align with or fail the reciprocal obligations between the state and learners in a holistic manner. Based on this gap, this study offers an integrated conceptual framework as a form of literature gap, aimed at unifying these partially studied perspectives into a cohesive analysis. This approach is expected to provide a solid conceptual foundation and practical guidelines for diagnosing and realigning curriculum policy with social expectations.

This study was conducted to examine the deep philosophical commitments embedded in Nigerian curriculum design, which have so far remained limited and discussed only in a partial manner within scientific publications. The significance of the results of this study is expected to fill academic vacancies, clarify conceptual developments, identify study trends, and reveal aspects that have been overlooked in existing literature. Beyond enriching scientific literature, this study is also expected to serve as a vital reference for researchers, academics, and policymakers in developing future studies and implementations within post colonial educational philosophy and curriculum design.

The primary objective of this study is to critically analyze the alignment between Nigeria's educational policies and its actual curriculum delivery through the lens of the educational social contract. To achieve this objective, the study focuses on evaluating the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Nigerian national policies on education, identifying the precise points of breach within the state learner contract, and synthesizing these insights to offer actionable frameworks for post colonial educational reform

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review design guided by the PRISMA framework (Agrawal et al., 2024) and incorporates thematic synthesis following Naeem et al. (2023), allowing inductive generation of analytical themes across disciplinary traditions encompassing social contract theory, decolonial philosophy, critical pedagogy, and epistemic justice. No primary data were collected or presented

2.2 Search Strategy and Screening

A systematic search was conducted across JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, African Journals Online, Scopus, Phil-Papers, and SABINET African Journals for peer-reviewed literature published between 2017 and 2026. Search terms were constructed in three clusters combining subject descriptors (curriculum design, decolonization, epistemic justice, indigenous knowledge, critical pedagogy), yielding 62 sources meeting inclusion criteria.

2.3 Source Classification

Of the 62 retained sources, 40 constitute the core analytical body directly addressing curriculum design, educational policy, and epistemic frameworks in Nigerian and analogous post-colonial Nigerian contexts, and were subjected to full thematic synthesis. The remaining 22 sources serve a theoretical and contextual framing function, providing the social contract foundations, decolonial infrastructure, and broader curriculum theory necessary for situating the analytical findings. One pre-2017 source was retained by exception, Fafunwa (1974), whose account of colonial curriculum displacement in Nigeria remains the definitive primary source on the subject.

2.4 Thematic Synthesis

Data from the 40 core analytical sources were extracted using a structured framework capturing theoretical orientation, geographical context, primary argument, and epistemological stance. Analysis followed the three-stage thematic synthesis process of Naeem et al. (2023): line-by-line coding, development of descriptive themes, and interpretive generation of analytical themes. Five themes emerged: the policy-curriculum gap in Nigerian education; the persistence of colonial epistemological hierarchies; the epistemic consequences of language policy; tensions between pedagogical ideals and transmission-oriented practice; and the interdependence of curriculum, assessment, teacher education, and language reform

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Social Contract Theory and Its Educational Extensions

The classical social contract tradition provides the foundational philosophical vocabulary for this review. Thomas Hobbes conceived of the social contract as a rational agreement to surrender certain freedoms to a sovereign authority in exchange for security. John Locke extended this to include the protection of natural rights, while Jean Jacques Rousseau emphasized the democratic legitimacy conferred by the general will. These formulations share a common structure, the relationship between individuals and political institutions is understood as reciprocally obligatory, not merely hierarchically authoritative.

The extension of social contract theory to education was systematically developed by Amy Gutmann in the 1980s, (Sardoc, 2025) who argued that democratic education requires the state to distribute educational opportunity in ways that enable future citizens to participate meaningfully in collective self-governance. John Rawls provided further theoretical infrastructure, his difference principle states that social and economic inequalities are only justified if they benefit the least advantaged members of society, has been widely applied to educational distribution (D'Olimpio, 2019; Essuman, 2019).

The concept of an educational social contract draws directly on the social contract tradition, but adds a critical dimension, epistemic obligation. This is the duty owed by the state to its citizens to ensure that education does not simply transfer information, but engages critically with the nature, sources, and limits of the knowledge it transmits. On this view, the state owes its citizens not just access to education, but education that is inclusive and genuinely reflective of the diverse knowledge systems that shape society. It is important to be clear about what this contract entails and what it does not. The educational social contract is not a bare transaction in which the state provides schooling and citizens become productive members of society. It is, more fundamentally, a commitment by the state to take seriously the epistemic conditions of its citizens, to ensure that learners are equipped not only with knowledge and skills, but with critically engaged understanding of the world they inhabit and the society they are called to shape. The distinction matters. A *transactional* model produces functional participants in an existing order, a genuinely *contractual* model produces something more demanding and more valuable, citizens who are not only skilled and informed, but critically aware and ethically engaged, individuals who can think independently, act responsibly, question assumptions, and participate thoughtfully in shaping the world around them. This is the educational ideal to which the social contract, properly understood, commits the state. The consequences of failing this commitment extend well beyond the classroom. It undermines the very conditions necessary for a healthy, functioning, and just society.

Curriculum is the institutional mechanism (Savage, 2017) through which the state's epistemic obligation is fulfilled. In other words, if the state owes citizens a critically engaged education, the curriculum is where that obligation becomes concrete. The implications of this educational social contract are most visible in the design of curriculum. Curriculum therefore becomes the primary institutional mechanism through which the state fulfills, or fails to fulfill,

its epistemic responsibilities. What is included, excluded, emphasized, or marginalized in the curriculum determines whether learners encounter knowledge as fixed information to be absorbed or as a body of ideas that can be examined, questioned, and understood in relation to the society they inhabit.

When curriculum is framed as a social contract mechanism, it moves beyond seeing it as a delivery mechanism for skills and information (Tan, 2024). Instead, curriculum becomes a formal agreement between the state and its citizens, the state promises to prepare individuals not just for employment or examination, but for independent life itself. The goal is to produce citizens who are skilled and informed, but also critically aware and ethically engaged, making a person a citizen rather than merely a subject. Critical awareness means the ability to interrogate the world, to ask not just what is true but why it is presented as true, and who benefits from that presentation. Ethical engagement means the capacity to care about one's society and to act within it from a sense of responsibility rather than mere compliance. Both form the basis of what political theorists call active citizenship. A curriculum fulfilling its social contract obligation actively cultivates these capacities, rather than accidentally producing them in some learners and suppressing them in others.

3.1.2 Nigerian Curriculum: Historical Foundations and Colonial Legacies

Prior to colonial intervention, education in Nigerian societies was not the absence of formal knowledge transmission but a different form of it, organized through apprenticeship systems, oral traditions, and community institutions that integrated moral development, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity into coherent epistemo-logical frameworks. Colonial disruption was therefore not simply an administrative reorganization of schooling but an epistemic displacement, the systematic delegitimization of indigenous knowledge traditions in favour of a Western framework presented as universal. As Ukeje & Aisiku (2022) document, British colonial education, formalized from the 1880s onwards, was designed not to cultivate autonomous citizens but to produce literate clerks capable of supporting colonial governance. Fafunwa (1974) identifies with precision what this substitution entailed, a curriculum organized around standardized subjects, formal examinations, and Western intellectual traditions that structured knowledge itself as a hierarchy, Western knowledge as scientific and universal, African knowledge as cultural and supplementary. This hierarchy was not incidental to the colonial curriculum, it was its epistemological core, and it is precisely this hierarchy that constitutes the deepest structural violation of the epistemic obligation the social contract framework demands.

What makes the post-independence period significant is not that it failed to produce change, but that the change it produced was largely symbolic rather than structural. Ofobuikwe (2025) argues that although Nigerian governments after independence embraced the rhetoric of national development and cultural identity, post-independence reforms focused on administrative expansion and the symbolic localization of educational materials, replacing colonial imagery with national imagery while leaving the underlying epistemological hierarchy intact. A curriculum that substitutes Nigerian historical figures for British ones but continues to organize knowledge within the same Western epistemological framework has not fulfilled the state's epistemic obligation, it has performed its fulfillment while deferring its substance. The social contract, in this review, was not reformed at independence; it was restated in new language.

The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), with its stated goals of democratic society, social equality, and the cultivation of critically engaged citizens, is philosophically consonant with the educational social contract as defined in this review. Yet, as Jacob & Samuel (2020) and Joel et al. (2019) demonstrate, these commitments exist primarily at the level of formal declaration. Assessment systems continue to privilege standardized knowledge reproduction (Au, 2022); curriculum structures continue to reflect the examination-oriented, decontextualized model inherited from colonial schooling, and the epistemological hierarchy that colonial education installed remains largely operative. The consequence is not simply educational underperformance but a sustained failure of the epistemic social contract, the Nigerian state has repeatedly declared its commitment to producing critically engaged citizens while the curriculum through which that commitment must be fulfilled has not been structurally reformed to meet it.

3.1.3 Decolonial Framework for Curriculum Reform

The limitations of post-independence curriculum reform in Nigeria must be situated within broader scholarly debates on the decolonization of knowledge systems in education. Decolonial scholars argue that the end of formal colonial rule did not necessarily dismantle the epistemological hierarchies established during colonialism. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) observes, colonial power often persists through the continued privileging of Western epistemic frameworks in curriculum design, assessment structures, and pedagogical practices long after political inde-

pendence. Within this perspective, the persistence of colonial logics in Nigerian education is not anomalous but structurally predictable. Constitutional independence altered the political status of the state, but it did not automatically reconfigure the epistemic foundations upon which formal education had been constructed. Consequently, many post-independence reforms have operated within curricular structures whose underlying assumptions about legitimate knowledge remain largely inherited from colonial educational models (Spindelman, & Crouch, 2025).

Within the literature on curriculum decolonization, scholars emphasize that meaningful reform involves more than the incorporation of indigenous or African content into existing curricular frameworks (Ntloedibe, 2025; Sefa et al., 2024; Dlamini, 2023;). Rather, decolonization requires a critical interrogation of the epistemic criteria through which knowledge is classified, validated, and transmitted within educational institutions. This involves questioning what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose intellectual traditions are recognized as authoritative, and which historical experiences shape curricular narratives. Importantly, this line of scholarship does not advocate the rejection of non-local or Western knowledge systems. Instead, it calls for the development of epistemically plural or multi-perspectival curricula in which diverse knowledge traditions coexist within a more balanced intellectual framework. Applied to the Nigerian context, this perspective suggests that curriculum reform must address not only issues of representation but also the deeper epistemological assumptions that structure knowledge production and validation within the educational system. In other words, curriculum reform should not only include more diverse content, but also rethink the fundamental ideas about what knowledge is and who gets to define it.

The significance of this debate becomes clearer when curriculum is understood as a central mechanism through which the state fulfills its educational responsibilities to citizens. Curriculum is not a neutral assemblage of subjects and content; it is a structured representation of the knowledge that a society considers valuable and worthy of transmission to future generations (Zajda, 2024; Deng, 2022). As such, it encodes normative assumptions about intellectual authority, social priorities, and the kinds of citizens that the education system seeks to cultivate. When interpreted through the framework of the educational social contract, the evaluation of a curriculum therefore extends beyond questions of access or institutional provision. The central issue becomes whether the knowledge structures embedded within the curriculum equip learners with the intellectual resources necessary for critical engagement with their social, political, and cultural environments. In this sense, curriculum design functions as a key site where the epistemic obligations of the state are either realized or undermined.

Viewed against this conceptual background, the historical persistence of colonial curricular structures in Nigeria raises significant concerns. The colonial foundations of Nigerian schooling established epistemological hierarchies that privileged Western intellectual traditions while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems (Ajayi & Ashir, 2024). Although successive educational reforms have acknowledged these historical legacies, much of the response has remained at the level of rhetorical commitment rather than structural transformation. As a result, scholars argue that colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary education systems. According to Nageri (2025) and Noutchie, (2025), educational structures still reflect colonial knowledge systems, noting that, the organization of curriculum content, assessment systems, and pedagogical priorities continues to reflect many of the epistemic assumptions inherited from colonial education. The consequence is a persistent tension between the normative aspirations articulated in educational policy and the institutional realities of curriculum practice. From the perspective of the educational social contract, this gap suggests that the epistemic commitments associated with democratic citizenship and inclusive knowledge production remain only partially realized within the contemporary Nigerian curriculum

3.2. Discussion

The current Nigerian curriculum design across different levels of education does not fulfill the epistemic obligations that the educational social contract places on the state (Harper & Saltmarsh, 2024). This finding has implications that extend beyond curriculum content to the philosophical foundations upon which educational reform in Nigeria has repeatedly been attempted and consistently fallen short.

The most significant implication concerns the distinction between symbolic and structural reform in curriculum design, which this review identifies as the defining characteristic of Nigeria's curriculum problem and the primary mechanism through which the educational social contract has been repeatedly breached. Post-independence curriculum revisions have operated predominantly at the symbolic level, revising policy language, expanding institutional provision, and localizing surface content without interrogating the epistemological framework that organizes what is taught, how knowledge is validated, whose intellectual traditions are accorded authority within the curriculum, and the type of individuals it wants to produce (Luckett, 2019). This pattern produces a paradox the literature has noted: Nigerian educational policy has grown progressively more ambitious in its democratic and citizenship com-

mitments while the curriculum epistemology through which those commitments must be realized has remained structurally static (Mukminin et al., 2019). The social contract framework developed in this review renders that paradox clear. A state fulfills its epistemic obligation not by declaring its commitment to producing critically engaged, democratically capable citizens but by constructing the epistemological conditions under which such citizens can actually be formed (Levine & Stevens, 2022). Symbolic reform satisfies the declarative dimension of the contract while leaving its substantive dimension unfulfilled (Choirunnisa & Ibrahim, 2025). It is precisely this gap between declaration and epistemological substance that constitutes the systemic breach this review has identified, and it is precisely this gap that no amount of policy revision, without accompanying epistemological restructuring, can close.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) theorization of coloniality as a structural rather than merely historical condition locates the problem with precision: the epistemological hierarchies embedded in Nigerian curriculum are not residual colonial content removable through textbook revision, they are organizing principles of the knowledge framework itself (Mbah & Ezegwu, 2024; Ajani, 2020). Meaningful reform therefore requires genuine and deliberate reconstruction rather than the continued supplementation of a Western epistemological core with African content at its margins (Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025).

The fulfillment of Nigeria's educational social contract requires simultaneous action at three interdependent levels. First, the epistemological reconstruction of the curriculum framework through an epistemically inclusive review process that interrogates foundational assumptions about legitimate knowledge, rather than merely adding indigenous content to an unreformed epistemological structure (Druker-Ibanez & Caceres-Jensen, 2022). This involves curriculum reform that rethinks the whole knowledge system behind education, not just adds indigenous topics to a curriculum that still treats Western knowledge as the main authority (Ewuoso & Ogundiran, 2025). Second, the radical reform of assessment systems to reward critical engagement and independent intellectual judgment rather than the reproduction of authorized knowledge (Ongesa, 2020). Third, the transformation of teacher education to develop teachers who question and understand the knowledge they teach as a core professional competency rather than a peripheral concern (Kiraz & Yilmaz-Yildiz, 2025). These are not sequential priorities or optional interventions. They are interdependent conditions, because a reconstructed curriculum without reformed assessment will be taught to the examination, reformed assessment without transformed teacher education will produce resistance rather than engagement, and all three will remain structurally inaccessible to the majority of Nigerian learners (Peurach et al., 2019). Pursued in isolation, each reform reproduces the pattern this review has identified throughout Nigeria's post-independence educational history: ambitious transformation at the surface level, structural continuity beneath it (Maine & Wagner, 2021). The social contract framework makes clear that until the epistemological foundations of the curriculum are subjected to the same reform ambition repeatedly applied to its institutional structures, Nigeria's commitment to producing critically engaged, epistemically capable, and democratically active citizens will remain a declaration in search of the institutional conditions necessary for its fulfillment (Heckman et al., 2023).

Language policy represents one of the most consequential dimensions of curriculum as a social contract in Nigeria. It appears as ambitious declaration at the policy level but with structural inadequacy at the level of implementation and epistemological foundation (Ojose, 2019). Nigeria's National Language Policy stipulates that early education should use the mother tongue or local language where possible, with a gradual transition to English as a medium of instruction in later years. On its face, this appears to represent a meaningful concession to Nigeria's extraordinary linguistic diversity, acknowledging that learning proceeds most effectively when conducted in a language the learner commands with fluency and conceptual depth (Benson et al., 2021). In practice, however, the policy functions at a surface level that does not discharge the epistemic obligation it implicitly invokes.

The problem is not simply the timing of the transition to English. It is that the policy's underlying assumption treats language as a medium of delivery rather than as a medium of thought, a distinction that is philosophically critical (Chikwaka-Mpezeni & Chigwedere, 2025). Language is not a neutral vehicle through which pre-formed knowledge is transmitted, it is the cognitive infrastructure through which knowledge is constructed, interrogated, and related to lived experience (Gupta, 2023). When the language of instruction is structurally disconnected from the language in which learners think, reason, and make meaning of their social world, the curriculum does not merely become harder to access, it becomes epistemically alienating (Ewuoso & Ogundiran, 2025). Learners are required to encounter, process, and reproduce knowledge in a linguistic framework that bears limited relation to the conceptual world they inhabit outside the classroom. This is not a pedagogical inconvenience, it is a structural form of epistemic exclusion that compounds the epistemological marginalization already produced by colonial knowledge hierarchies (Eboreime et al., 2026). The result is what this review characterizes as a doubly stratified breach of the social contract: learners are simultaneously denied epistemically inclusive curriculum content and the linguistic conditions

necessary for genuine intellectual engagement with whatever content the curriculum does provide (Seleke & Teis, 2025).

The question of how language policy can be instrumentalized to actually achieve the social contract of curriculum, rather than merely gesturing toward it, requires moving beyond the surface framework of the current policy in three interconnected directions. First, the policy must reconceptualize language not as a transitional medium to be phased out in favour of English but as a permanent cognitive resource to be developed and sustained throughout the educational process (Kazeem & Suleiman, 2020). This does not require the elimination of English from the curriculum, English proficiency remains a legitimate and important educational goal in the Nigerian context (Ojose, 2019). It requires, rather, the construction of an additive multilingual framework in which Nigerian languages are developed as full academic languages capable of sustaining rigorous intellectual inquiry, rather than being treated as temporary scaffolding to be removed once English instruction begins (Gupta, 2023). An additive multilingual curriculum is one in which learners develop genuine cognitive fluency in multiple languages simultaneously, with each language accorded equal pedagogical legitimacy and used for substantive intellectual work rather than merely for communicative transition (Kazeem & Suleiman, 2020).

Pedagogical practice must be understood as a dimension of curriculum reform rather than a separate concern, because the mode of knowledge transmission is inseparable from the epistemic obligations the social contract places on the state (Teasley & Butler, 2020). A curriculum cannot fulfill its contractual commitment to producing critically engaged, intellectually autonomous citizens if the pedagogical practices through which it is enacted are organized around opposite principles (Marabini, 2022). The current dominant mode in which the teacher transmits authorized knowledge, the learner receives and reproduces it, and the examination measures the outcome of that reproduction is not a neutral delivery mechanism, it is the pedagogical expression of the same colonial epistemological hierarchy this review has identified as the structural root of Nigeria's curriculum problem (Okeke & Ramaila, 2025). Colonial education was designed to produce compliant auxiliaries, not critical citizens, and the pedagogical practices it institutionalized—transmission, memorization, and examination compliance, are epistemologically consistent with that original purpose (Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025). When those practices persist within a curriculum that now declares democratic and citizenship goals, they do not simply create an implementation gap; they create a philosophical contradiction at the heart of Nigeria's educational social contract, the simultaneous declaration of epistemic obligation and the institutional reproduction of its negation (Luckett & Shay, 2020).

Resolving this contradiction requires recognizing that pedagogical transformation and curriculum decolonization are not sequential reforms but dimensions of a single philosophical reorientation (Shabalala, 2025). The epistemic obligation of the social contract is discharged not when a reformed curriculum is written into policy but when learners encounter knowledge as something to be interrogated and related to their own social realities, and that encounter is only possible when the pedagogy through which curriculum is enacted positions learners as active epistemic agents rather than passive recipients (Ongesa, 2020). This means that teacher education, classroom practice, and assessment design must be reconceived in direct alignment with the epistemically plural, critically oriented curriculum that the social contract demands (Nwigwe, 2026). The fulfillment of Nigeria's educational social contract therefore requires that the philosophical reorientation this review calls for penetrates not only the content and organization of the curriculum but the epistemic relationship between teacher, learner, and knowledge that pedagogical practice enacts every day in every classroom.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implication

The findings of this study provide theoretical, policy, and practical implications for research on curriculum design as an educational social contract in postcolonial contexts by synthesizing and mapping that the failure of the Nigerian curriculum is not merely an administrative or technical implementation issue, but rather a structural and philosophical failure caused by the persistence of colonial epistemological hierarchies in educational policy and instructional practice. The findings of this study fill a Literature Gap and Knowledge to Action Gap regarding how the state's epistemic obligation is compromised due to the disconnect between symbolic commitments in national educational policies and the institutional realities of knowledge structures, assessment systems, language policies, and transmission-oriented pedagogy.

4.2 Research Contribution

The findings of this study contribute as a new source of scientific knowledge in the fields of Philosophy of Education, Educational Policy, and Decolonial Studies by synthesizing a new framework regarding epistemological reconstruction within the educational social contract of postcolonial developing nations. This framework can be used to explain the paradigm shift in curriculum reform, moving from simple policy revisions toward holistic epistemological reconstruction that integrates epistemic pluralism, additive multilingualism, critical pedagogy, and assessment reform, through the accumulation of findings from previous studies

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

This study relies on a systematic review and thematic synthesis of existing literature rather than empirical field data collected directly from schools, teachers, or students in Nigeria. Consequently, while the analytical framework provides deep conceptual and philosophical insights, the practical observations are bounded by the available published sources within the specified database search timeframe. Additionally, the contextual focus centers primarily on the Nigerian educational system, which means that while the broader themes apply to postcolonial environments, specific policy dynamics may vary in other Global South jurisdictions

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should conduct empirical and mixed methods studies to investigate how teachers and school administrators navigate the tension between official curriculum policy and classroom realities on the ground. Scholars are also encouraged to perform comparative analyses across different sub-Saharan African nations to assess how varying postcolonial language policies and epistemological traditions influence the fulfillment of the educational social contract. Finally, future studies should explore practical models for operationalizing epistemic pluralism and additive multilingualism within standardized assessment structures and teacher training programs

6. CONCLUSION

This review examined Nigerian curriculum design as an expression of the educational social contract, evaluating whether it fulfills the epistemic obligations the contract places on the state. The central finding is that it does not. This failure is structural, rooted in colonial epistemological hierarchies that successive reforms have acknowledged rhetorically but transformed only superficially. From the colonial displacement and through the symbolic post-independence reforms, to the persistent policy-practice gap, the evidence is consistent, the Nigerian state has repeatedly declared its commitment to producing critically engaged citizens while maintaining curriculum structures that systematically undermine the conditions necessary for that commitment to be realized.

The review introduces epistemic obligation as a distinct and evaluable dimension of the state's educational responsibilities, and demonstrates that the policy-curriculum gap is philosophical rather than administrative. Meaningful reform requires epistemically plural curricula, aligned language policy, and transformed pedagogical practice. Until the epistemological foundations of the curriculum are subjected to the same reform ambition applied to its surface content, fulfillment of Nigeria's educational social contract will remain deferred.

Acknowledgments

None

Author Contribution Statement

All authors discussed the results, contributed to the final manuscript, and approved the final version for publication. Emmanuel Lucas Nwachukwu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, Formal Analysis, and Data curation. Lasbrey Ikechukwu Unegbu: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing. Godson Chidi Nwokorie: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing. Sule Omeiza Adebayo: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing.

Declaration of Generative AI (GenAI) Usage in Scientific Writing

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools ([Gemini AI](#)) were used to identify relevant academic literature to understand the arguments presented in the sources and to create an outline/research framework. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the [IJITL GenAI Tool Usage Policy](#), with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Statement

This study did not receive any specific funding from public, commercial, or non-profit organizations.

REFERENCES

- Agrawal, S., Oza, P., Kakkar, R., Tanwar, S., Jetani, V., Undhad, J., & Singh, A. (2024). Analysis and recommendation system based on PRISMA checklist to write systematic review. *Assessing Writing*, 61, 100866.
- Ajani, O. A. (2020). Sociology of knowledge in the era of academic dependency in Africa. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, 18(1), 39-52.
- Ajayi, T., & Ashir, E. D. (2024). African Epistemology and Culture: Creating a Sustainable Development. *NIU Journal of Humanities*, 9(3), 157-164.
- Ashwin, P. (2022). The educational purposes of higher education: Changing discussions of the societal outcomes of educating students. *Higher Education*, 84(6), 1227-1244.
- Au, W. (2022). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality*. Routledge.
- Benson, C., Brown, K. D., & Goodman, B. (2021). Foregrounding language issues in current comparative and international education research. *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education* 2020, 40, 215-237.
- Brissett, N. O. (2020). Teaching like a subaltern: Postcoloniality, positionality, and pedagogy in international development and education. *Comparative Education Review*, 64(4), 577-597.
- Chikwaka-Mpezeni, M. P., & Chigwedere, Y. (2025). Literature review related to cultural identity challenges of ESL learners in African rural contexts. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 7(6), 1-15.
- Choirunnisa, F., & Ibrahim, M. (2025). Reconstructing teachers' role and learning paradigm under the Merdeka curriculum. *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmiah Multidisipliner*, 2(3), 1666-1676.
- D'Olimpio, L. (2019). Moral education within the social contract: Whose contract is it anyway?. *Journal of Moral Education*, 48(4), 515-528.
- Deng, Z. (2022). Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: Pushing the boundaries. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(5), 599-617.
- Desjardins, R., Torres, C. A., & Wiksten, S. (2023). Social contract pedagogy: A dialogical and deliberative model for global citizenship education. UNESCO Futures of Education initiative background paper.
- Dlamini, N. (2023). Decolonizing the Curriculum: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Higher Education. *TRICKS: Journal of Education and Learning Practices*, 1(3), 38-49.
- Druker-Ibanez, S., & Caceres-Jensen, L. (2022). Integration of indigenous and local knowledge into sustainability education: A systematic literature review. *Environmental Education Research*, 28(8), 1209-1236.
- Eboreime, E., Ibisomi, L., Itanyi, I. U., Kanya, L., Wamuti, B., Ohanyido, F., Ataguba, J. E. O. (2026). Implementation science in Africa-Whose epistemology counts? *The Lancet Global Health*, 14(2), e286-e290.
- Essuman, A. (2019). Improving education delivery through community-school partnership: Is the "social contract" being weakened?—A study of two rural schools. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 33(6), 1336-1351.
- Ewuoso, C., & Ogundiran, T. (2025). The experience of internal exclusion within the context of education in Africa: A scoping review of the views of philosophers of education and educationists. *Societies*, 15(5), 116.
- Fafunwa, A. B. (1974). Education in the mother tongue: A Nigerian experiment. *Journal of African studies*, 1(3), 285.

- Gupta, N. (2023). English language policy in multilingual societies: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of International English Research Studies (JIERS)*, 1(2), 46-53.
- Harper, J., & Saltmarsh, J. (2024). Pausing in pursuit of a new social contract between higher education and society. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 56(2), 4-10.
- Heckman, S. J., Letkiewicz, J. C., & Kim, K. T. (2023). A fracturing social contract? How perceptions of the value of higher education are changing. *Journal of family and economic issues*, 44(1), 156-174.
- Ignatius, I. P. (2022). Decay in Educational System: The Nigerian Perspective. *Journal of Graduate Education Research*, 3(1), 5.
- Jacob, H. U., Amiara, S. A., Omeje, U. P., & Mbam, N. M. (2024). Navigating colonial legacies and its varying impacts on Nigeria's development. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*, 17(2), 315-335.
- Jacob, O. N., & Samuel, A. (2020). Educational policy in Nigerian: Challenges of implementation and ways forward. *Middle European Scientific Bulletin*, 4, 1-9.
- Joel, E. I., Ogi, J., & Ikpe, J. (2019). Educational policy implementation in Nigeria: Challenges and strategies. *Benue state University journal of Education Management*, 1(2), 261-266.
- Kazeem, A. S., & Suleiman, M. I. (2020). Prospects and problems of language policy. *Britain International of Linguistics Arts and Education (BIO LAE) Journal*, 2(1), 330-337.
- Kiraz, E., & Yilmaz-Yildiz, S. B. (2025). Educational ideologies in transition: Analyzing teachers' shifting perspectives through structured reflection. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 14(2), 365-380.
- Levine, E. J., & Stevens, M. L. (2022). Negotiating the academic social contract. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 54(1), 2-7.
- Locatelli, R. (2024). Renewing the social contract for education: Governing education as a common good. *Prospects*, 54(2), 315-321.
- Luckett, K. (2019). Curriculum contestation in a post-colonial context: A view from the South. In *Curriculum as contestation*. Routledge.
- Luckett, K., & Shay, S. (2020). Reframing the curriculum: A transformative approach. *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(1), 50-65.
- Maine, K., & Wagner, C. (2021). Student voices in studies on curriculum decolonisation: A scoping review. *Psychology in Society*, 61, 27-53.
- Marabini, A. (2022). *Critical thinking and epistemic injustice: An essay in epistemology of education*. Springer Nature.
- Mbah, M. F., & Ezegwu, C. (2024). The decolonisation of climate change and environmental education in Africa. *Sustainability*, 16(9), 3744.
- Mukminin, A., Habibi, A., Prasojo, L. D., Idi, A., & Hamidah, A. (2019). Curriculum reform in Indonesia: Moving from an exclusive to inclusive curriculum. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 9(2), 53-72.
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22.
- Nageri, K. I. (2025). Colonial legacies and the epistemic structure of management education. *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation (IJSEIro)*, 12(24), 510-530.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. (2018). The dynamics of epistemological decolonisation in the 21st century: Towards epistemic freedom. *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 40(1), 16-24.
- Noutchie, S. C. O. (2025). Decolonizing education in Africa: Curriculum reform, language policy, and indigenous knowledge systems. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 14(5), 364-369.
- Ntloedibe, F. N. (2025). Unmasking the Western canon: decolonization of the curriculum as an epistemological balance of knowledge systems. *African Identities*, 23(4), 1485-1501.
- Nwigwe, E. O. (2026). Understanding place-based education in Nigeria: A structured narrative review of its status, barriers, and African comparative insights. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 13, 102409.
- Ofobuike, J. C. (2025). A critique of the colonial underpinnings of Nigerian education policies. *Journal of Philosophy, Policy and Strategic Studies (JPPSS)*, 2(1), 114-123.
- Ofori, S. D., Frempong, D., Olateju, M., & Ifenatuora, G. P. (2024). Educational Reforms and Their Impact on Student Performance: A Review in African Countries. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation*, 5(3), 1116-1125.
- Ojose, B. (2019). Languages in Nigeria's educational sector: Issues, challenges and perspectives. In *Bilingualism and bilingual education: Politics, policies and practices in a globalized society*. 39-53.

Okeke, U. K., & Ramaila, S. (2025). Decolonizing secondary school science education through contextualized instruction: An exploration of the nature of science, adaptive expertise, instructional implications and pedagogical frameworks for knowledge integration. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11, 101614.

Oluwalola, F. K., Olaoluwa, A. A., & Ojo, O. J. (2022). The impact of policy implementation on nigeria educational system. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 14(1), 31-38.

Ongesa, C. M. (2020). The critical thinking skill gap in the Kenyan education curriculum: The 21st century skills for the global citizen. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education*, 9(1), 178-191.

Peurach, D. J., Cohen, D. K., Yurkofsky, M. M., & Spillane, J. P. (2019). From mass schooling to education systems: Changing patterns in the organization and management of instruction. *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), 32-67.

Sapto, A., Utami, I. W. P., Leksana, G., Ayundasari, L., & Ramadhan, F. (2022). Recent trends in the decolonization of history curriculum: A systematic review. *Embracing New Perspectives in History, Social Sciences, and Education*, 39-43.

Sardoc, M. (2025). Justice, education and the social contract: An interview with Samuel Freeman. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 1-11.

Savage, G. (2017). Neoliberalism, education and curriculum. *Powers of curriculum: Sociological perspectives on education*, 143-165.

Sefa Dei, G. J., & Cacciavillani, A. (2024). Actualizing decolonization: a case for anticolonizing and Indigenizing the curriculum. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 58(2-3), 209-226.

Seleke, B., & Teis, N. J. (2025). Towards inclusive education: Indigenous knowledge, gender, and policy in the Global South. *Gender and Behaviour*, 23(2), 23395-23411.

Shabalala, N. P. (2025). Decolonising environmental education in Africa through the early integration of indigenous knowledge systems guided by Zibanjwa Zisemaphuphu. *Discover Sustainability*, 6(1), 892.

Spindelman, D., & Crouch, L. (2025). Purpose of education in former British African colonies: From contestation to bureaucratization. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 113, 103226.

Tan, C. (2024). The social contract and education: Confucian viewpoints. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 1-12.

Teasley, C., & Butler, A. (2020). Intersecting critical pedagogies to counter coloniality. In *The SAGE handbook of critical pedagogies*. 186-204.

Toukan, E., & Tawil, S. (2024). A new social contract for education: Rebuilding trust in education as a common good. *Prospects*, 54(2), 259-275.

Ukeje, O., & Aisiku, J. U. (2022). Education in Nigeria. In *Education in Africa*. Routledge.

Zajda, J. (2024). Curriculum design and evaluation in the global culture. In *Handbook of Curriculum Theory, Research, and Practice* (pp. 783-797). Springer International Publishing.

Zvoushe, H., & Uwizeyimana, D. E. (2025). Complexities of decolonising African public administration in the neoliberal world. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), 2563705.

Article Information

Copyright holder: © Nwachukwu, E. L. et al. (2025)	Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of AEDUCIA and/or the editor(s). AEDUCIA and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.
First Publication Right: Indonesian Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning	
Article info: DOI: https://doi.org/10.64420/ijitl.v3i2.566	
Word Count: 7016	This Article is licensed under: CC-BY-SA 4.0