

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the issue of quality in rural primary schools in Nigeria. Quality was linked to both individual and national development and thus necessary to consider an approach that supports the practice of quality assurance in a holistic rather than individualistic oriented method. Quality assurance system should be seen as a process of enhancing and promoting collaboration and participation for institutional development. This entails a shift to a more pragmatic approach that encourages the involvement of everybody in the drive towards ensuring quality in Nigerian rural primary schools. Therefore, governments and policy makers need to put in place strategies that will serve to improve the condition of teacher and teaching in order to improve student achievement across rural schools in Nigeria

Keywords: *Quality assurance, Rural Primary Schools*

INTRODUCTION

Every society requires adequate human and material resources to improve its social organization, preserve the culture, enhance economic development and reform the political structures. Education is often seen as a prerequisite for quality manpower development and creation of wealth, a sure path to success in life and service to humanity. No wonder, one of the national education goals is the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society (NPE, 2004).

Education is a key investment in any country with enormous social and economic benefits accruing from it. There is no gainsaying the fact that education is very vital to the pace of social, political and economic development of any nation. This is why every child, whether in the rural or urban community, must be given equal opportunity to participate and benefit from qualitative basic education in order to promote accelerated development in Nigeria. At present, the quality of education offered to children in many rural primary schools in Nigeria is nothing to write home about. Thus, many parents are not willing to invest in their children's education because they are not convinced of its quality and value. The National Policy on Education (2004) describes primary education as the education given in an educational institution to children aged normally between 6-11+years. The policy states that since the rest of the educational system is built upon it, primary education is the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system. However, despite the pre-

eminence accorded the primary level of education in Nigeria, the quality of the output of the recipients of the said level of education have been a great issue that prompted so many questions in the mind of anybody investing on this level of education. One basic goal of Education for All (EFA) is ensuring that by 2015, all children have access to a complete, free and compulsory basic education of good quality. However, the conservative estimate of UNICEF (2002) is that some 45% of primary school age children are out of school in Nigeria.

Investment in primary education has become internationally recognized as an instrument par excellence for development and eradication of poverty. Primary education requires public financial support more than any of the other levels in education with the introduction of the compulsory 9-3-4 system of education. Akinwumi (2008) emphasizes that teaching children how to read and write can boost economic growth, arrest the spread of AIDS, and break the cycle of poverty. Gidado (2008) asserts that primary education system has suffered tremendously in Nigeria ranging from poor finance, inappropriate allocation and a host of other problems.

QUALITY IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Quality has to do with whether something is good or bad; it is about the standard of something when compared with other things. It therefore pre-supposes that there is a standard set. Quality control is therefore directed at determining the extent to which a product meets that standard. Cole (1996) defines quality control as basically a system for setting standards and taking appropriate action to deal with deviations outside permitted tolerances. Quality control is a retroactive action used to determine the quality of a product or a system after processing and during which wastages would have occurred and what is left is to reject and/or battle with rectification. It is however, better, more rewarding and less costly to take steps to prevent failure and wastage before they happen. Hence, the need for quality assurance which is preventive rather than corrective.

According to Ijaiya (2001), the worth of any educational system as an investment lies in its capability to continuously serve its customers better and remain relevant. Educational planners are therefore faced with two main challenges: providing for quantity and for quality. Quantity according to her is concerned with numbers, that is, getting as many citizens as possible to school within the shortest time allowed while quality is about how good or bad the products are.

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Quality control practices in Nigerian education is based essentially on school inspection, monitoring and control. While such measures are appropriate for obtaining data on policy implementation and for strategic planning, and aid public accountability, they are of little value when it comes to managing classroom learning processes (West-Burnham, 1994). Also, while the provision and rehabilitation of school facilities assist in the delivery of quality, some intervention is needed to plan and utilize such

facilities effectively in the teaching/learning process. School inspection has been criticized for its inadequacy to assist classroom teachers to improve their performance (Tuoyo, 1999). Most children come to school with hope and enthusiasm to learn but somewhere in the process, many fail even though teachers are teaching. Failure therefore, suggests that there is a dissonance between what the teachers teach and the needs of the learners. Inspectors on visits to the school may not be able to handle this problem successfully without the schools' input. Schools are therefore in the best position to address such a problem being in constant touch with their students.

The worth of any management is based on its ability to produce quality products and satisfy clients and other stakeholders. Its tasks, therefore, include identifying and solving any problem that militates against quality delivery. Such a problem solving approach will be directed at taking preventive measures against wastage. Prevention is therefore the basis of Quality Assurance Management or Total Quality Management (West -Burnham, 1995). It should be noted that quality delivery begins from policy makers to resource providers, policy implementers and students; that is, it is the responsibility of all stakeholders. Both the input and the processing contribute to the quality of the products. School-based total quality management should put in place as preventive measures against failure and wastage. Efforts would be made to identify learners' needs, problems would be identified and underlying causes addressed. The philosophy behind TQM is to develop the culture of continuous improvement through employees; collaborative efforts for the satisfaction of customers' (pupils, parents, teachers and community) needs (Ijaiya, 2001).

ROLE OF TEACHERS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Teachers are the most important refined human species that skillfully identify, develop and nurture the potentials of productive citizenry for meaningful creation of wealth, pleasure and services which will sustain quality life. Relevance of teachers to individual and national development is wholly dependent on their role in providing functional education and training to the learners within and outside the school settings. Efficient educated professionals such as doctors, pharmacists, nurses, engineers, and other enlightened artisans of citizens are the refined products of teachers from education industry. Hence, teachers are the potent agents of human engineering and survival (Ogunwuyi, 2010).

She believes that the whole conduct, manner, attitude, action and personality of practicing teacher should gloriously radiate exemplary academic excellence and loving-kindness with sympathetic understanding of the learner's needs. Government should therefore involve the practicing teachers in education policy formulation and implementation for sustainable capacity building in the achievement of development objectives. The quality of the work undertaken by a teacher has significant effects upon his or her pupils or students. Furthermore, those who pay teachers' salaries wish to be assured that they are receiving value for money. Ways to measure the quality of work of individual teachers, of schools, or of education systems as a whole,

are therefore often sought. Assessment of teacher's performance may be undertaken with a view to identifying teachers' needs for additional training or development, or, in extreme cases, to identify those teachers that should be required to leave the profession. In some countries, teachers are required to reapply periodically for their license to teach, and in so doing, to prove that they still have the requisite skills.

QUALITY ASSURANCE NEEDS OF DIFFERENT GROUPS

Different stakeholders in education have different perceptions of quality assurance. Some of these according to Quinn (2007) are:

Teachers' Perception of Quality Education: Teachers view quality education in term of outcome. First, they focus on learning as a means of achieving student individual goals, good result and performance as a means for skill development and achieving employability. Teachers also understand quality education in terms of fulfilling the needs of the community and the nation at large. They describe socially acceptable behaviour and community commitment as important to the vision of quality education. Teachers emphasize that students should have good manners, be responsible and become good citizen. Also, another important quality related factor is the availability of resources, having sufficient educational resources and teaching materials in the classrooms are crucial to promoting quality of education.

Students' Perception of Quality Education: The most important feature of quality for the learners is the characteristics of teachers. They emphasize that teachers should be friendly and kind, teach with love, tell jokes and show that they like children . Students view teachers, who do not beat, rebuke insult or embarrass them in class before other students as demonstrating good practice in teaching. They emphasize the importance of teacher's ability to explain well and willing to explain difficulty topics in the local language. Quality outcomes in terms of achieving good grades and getting jobs or becoming self employed are crucial elements of quality in education.

Head-teachers' perception of Quality Education: The head-teachers' perception of quality implies having qualified teachers who prepare lessons thoroughly, uses learner-centred approach, appropriate materials, mastery of his/her subjects content and knows well his/her students. They believe that the involvement of all stakeholders in education system is crucial, especially in establishing a good relationship between parents and the school.

Parents' Perception of Quality Education: Parents' perception of quality of education is in relation to exemplary performance of the learners. Parents perceive quality education to gaining reading and writing skills and passing with good grades, also most parents stress that the purpose of learning is to achieve future career goals and employment. They also perceive quality education as a tool of acquiring good character formation and moulding good citizenry. Quality education also, to parents, means to have infrastructure in terms of physical facilities, such as adequate classroom, teaching materials, playing ground and experienced teachers.

INSTITUTIONAL COMPONENTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

The institutionalization of quality assurance is firmly routed on the agenda of primary education in many developed and developing countries around the world, the demand for greater accountability and efficiency in respect of public financing, trend towards mass participation in the face of shrinking resources, and greater stakeholder scrutiny of education and training processes and outcomes have led to the increasing implementation of formal quality assurance arrangements within educational institutions and systems. A quality assurance system, is intended to ensure that the primary education are relevant and responsive to the needs of learners and other stakeholders within the context of the social, intellectual and economic requirements of societal development. The institutional framework could be guided according to Mulkeen (2006) with the criteria specified below:

- i Cultivate and maintain a culture of continuous performance improvement.
- ii Develop and validate well-evaluation reports.
- iii Develop reliable quality assurance performance indicators.
- iv Provide information for the stakeholders about the strengths and weaknesses of the institution.

PROBLEMS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

At the different levels of the education system, poor quality is being experienced in Nigeria today and this is exhibited in many ways. At the lower and middle levels of education, there are reported cases of increases in the rate of absentee and ineffective teachers in schools and the inability of students (school outputs) to read and write effectively. It has also become clear that graduates of tertiary institutions are often not suitably qualified to fill available vacancies or to contribute effectively to national development. Teachers in some rural schools spend a proportion of their working hours in income generating activities such as farming, hunting, petty-trading and so on. This practice not only creates discipline problems in rural schools but also undermines the value of the learning process (Adedeji and Bamidele 2003).

It is wrong, however to attribute the low levels of literacy and school achievement to school related factors alone. This is because other factors such as the home, the society, the mosques/church, government and personal characteristics are also important in child development (Longe, 1999). However, much as Nigerian governments may be aware of the need to provide more resources to improve the quality of education, there is a limit to the amount of resources that these governments can allocate to education annually. For the education industry to carry out its functions of developing quality human capital, there is need for checks and balances by regular and effective supervision and inspection. Unfortunately, the inspectorate services both at the state and federal levels have not lived up to expectation. This is because the inspectorate service is plagued by a number of issues and challenges. Edho (2009) found out that distances (location) of some schools made it inaccessible for supervisors to visit such schools. Okugbe (2010) discovered that few supervisors were assigned to supervise too many primary schools in Nigeria.

CHALLENGES IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

Challenges of competent teachers: Recruiting, training, and supporting competent teachers to provide quality learning can be particularly challenging. The conditions in rural schools are particularly peculiar especially when there are lesser teachers to the number of classes that the teacher has to teach. The ideal rural teacher, according to Brown (2003) quoting from Lemke, (1994) is certified to teach more than one subject or grade level, can teach students with a wide range of abilities in the same classroom, is prepared to supervise extracurricular activities, and can adjust to the community. As a result, rural teachers must constantly upgrade their skills through pre-service and in-service training programmes.

Challenges of poor infrastructural facilities: Many rural primary schools are crumbling because of lack of maintenance. Many of the buildings were erected in the late 1950s and early 1960s with mud blocks. Today they are not only a health hazard but also potential death traps. In fact, in many areas, classes are being held in the open during the dry season and when the raining season comes children are crowded into the few available ramshackle buildings.

Challenges of access: In general, access has expanded more rapidly in urban than in rural areas, and as the country approaches universal enrollment, the children who never attend school are often those in the least developed rural areas. Many factors contribute to lower educational participation in rural than in urban areas. Some of these factors are on the demand side of education, while others are on the supply side. On the demand side, rural children may be less interested in attending school. First, the opportunity costs of attending school are often higher in rural areas (Lockheed and Verspoor, 1991). Many rural households depend on their children for help at busy times of the agricultural year such as during the harvest. Furthermore, they are likely to have less parental encouragement to go to school and more alternative demands on their time. (Taylor and Mulhall, 2001).

On the supply side, governments may find it more difficult to supply quality educational services in rural areas. In Nigeria, teachers prefer to teach in urban areas. Rural teachers often have less access to support services than their urban counterparts and fewer opportunities to attend in-service courses. In some cases, they may have difficulty accessing books and materials.

Challenges of monitoring teachers: Monitoring teachers in remote areas presents additional difficulties to educational managers. This is crucial in order to address teacher absenteeism. It has been found that getting teachers to come to work is a major barrier to improving education outcomes. The physical remoteness of the school may encourage absenteeism. Many rural teachers are posted in a location away from their family or their home area. Travel to and from remote rural areas can be time consuming.

Challenges of System Failures and Administrative Bottlenecks: Teachers in rural schools often feel neglected by the authorities and perceive that they are treated unfairly regarding access to promotion, transfers, and other benefits. Such perceptions may foster lower morale among rural teachers. One of the particularly unwelcome consequences of poor monitoring and disciplinary procedure is that rural schools may be more open to child abuse than urban schools (Nhundu and Shumba, 2001).

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Teachers' condition of Service: UNESCO (2009) submits that if we are to put human development at the heart of socio-economic strategies, the advancement and working conditions of teachers must be addressed. Research has also shown that the quality of teachers is the most important school related factor in boosting students' achievement. Similarly, teachers are considered as key enabling factor in improving the quality of education (Morgan, Adedeji and Sieve 2006).

Political Commitment: Owing to the remote nature of rural schools, governments give less concern to issues of funding, provision of infrastructure and supply of qualified and experienced teachers. Given the obvious importance of the teachers, problems in supporting newly qualified teachers and a lack of career development opportunities in rural settings often combine to make teachers' effectiveness difficult in comparison with their urban counterparts.

Strengthening of the rural education system: Rural people need literacy and numerical skills to become informed participants in the social life of their community and engage in its development. When people have the skills and knowledge they need to be part of the economic and social life of their community, a more cohesive and inclusive society results.

Link teacher training to rural schools: The community should recognize teachers' accomplishments and invite them to participate in various activities. A number of strategies have been adopted by some countries to ensure that teachers stay in rural areas. Among these are: salary differentials- i.e. incentives for teachers locating in rural areas, targeted recruitment, rural-urban pay disparities, scholarships for certified teachers seeking advanced training while working in a rural area, and inconveniences allowances for teachers in rural areas (Frederick, 2009).

Encouraging teachers to work in their own community: Another alternative strategy may be to recruit student teachers from within each rural community, in the hope that personal history and family connections will entice them to teach in their home area after they attain their teacher certification. However, some countries, such as Malawi and Nigeria, report that teachers do not want to work in their own village, because their family may place too many demands on them. Various researchers have challenged the assumption that teachers recruited from a rural area want to return to their own community (Azam, 2001). In order to recruit rural teachers, administrators should

target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas.

Funding: To address this worsening problem, governments must shoulder higher responsibility for boosting rural education by allocating more fund to the sector. Adedeji, Okemakinde, and SSempebwa, (2008) affirm that finance is one of the problems confronting education sector owing to a drastic reduction in both the actual and proportion of government fund allocated to the education sector, despite the UNESCO's recommendations of allocation of 26% of a nation's national income to the sector. The proportion of funding in the rural educational investment should rise and governments should strive to provide children of poor rural families with access to free textbooks and exemption from miscellaneous expenses.

Training and retraining of teachers: The attempt to retain teachers who will be willing to teach in rural areas must start from the time when students are being admitted into the programmes of teaching profession. Universities in the United States have pre-service programmes for rural teachers(Boylan and Bandy, 1994). The degree to which a rural teacher becomes involved in community educational and cultural programmes influence his or her decision to remain; therefore, retention requires a coordinated school-community effort. Teachers in rural areas should also receive specific training designed to enable them to more effectively teach children who live in those areas.

Special incentives to rural workers: Finally, part of the strategy to recruit and retain high-calibre teachers in rural areas must focus on the issue of teachers' salaries and allowances. To attract and retain teachers in isolated communities, governments may need to pay them a bonus for their willingness to teach in those areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural schools face many challenges that do not exist in urban or suburban areas, Besides, many rural schools are confronted with the problem of dilapidated buildings, lack of up to date textbooks and resources, and inability to hold on to teachers. Thus, it is important for the policy makers to implement a policy that gives funding to the failing rural schools in order to keep them on the same level as the flourishing urban schools, as well as other types of schools.

Therefore, governments and policy makers need to put in place strategies that will serve to improve the condition of teacher and teaching in order to improve student achievement across rural schools in Nigeria. Moreover, it is essential for policy makers to look for new ways to help educate rural students. Additionally, the government should allocate more funding to rural schools in order to allow them to be equal to larger, urban and suburban schools. There is a clear need for both a better categorization of schools, and a more systematic monitoring of the relative situation of rural schools.

In order to recruit rural teachers, administrators should target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas, and rural teachers should be well remunerated according to the cost of living inconveniences. Since the government is still the major source of fund to education in Nigeria, there is the need to change the pattern of funding so that provision for primary education should adequately match its needs. To be able to take sound decisions on the management of primary education in Nigeria to enhance quality in rural primary schools, there is the need to ensure availability of accurate data on the system. The government should give the data bank all the enabling environment required to generate and analyse and bank the data. The institutional managers and teachers should be constantly trained and retrained in the modern data management techniques.

There is the need to step up the institutional capacity building. The rural primary school teachers should be mandated to attend training workshops and conferences to improve their teaching skills. Concerted efforts by ways of quality control and monitoring would improve the quality of rural primary schools and the government needs to step up its poverty alleviation process by rendering assistance to parents in the rural areas indirectly through provision of free books, uniforms and even free midday meals to the children of the poor.

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