

The Challenge of Minimum Standards and Quality Control of Primary Education in Nigeria

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Abstract : *The debate on standard and quality of education is as old as organized education itself, the world over. For the past four decades or thereabout, Nigerian academics and laymen alike have been challenging themselves with the debate on falling standard of education; especially at the primary school, which is the foundation for all levels of education. It is quite understandable, given the growing importance of trans-border educational provisions in the wake of globalization of education. In Nigeria, anxieties in education are stirred by the combined effects of population explosion in the classrooms at all levels, deteriorating physical facilities, continued inadequacy in funding; recurrent industrial actions by all sectors that invariably lead to truncated academic calendar. It is therefore, the concern of this paper to examine the quality of primary education in the last four decades and compare with the quality and minimum standards of it today; with a view to suggesting remedies where gaps exist.*

Keywords: *Minnum Standard in Nigerian Primary Education , Primary Education History, Quality Control in Primary Education, Reality in Primary Education .*

I. Introduction

The term Education connotes one's experiences in life. It is a process by which the individual acquires knowledge, skills, attitudes, aptitudes and possible values that would help such individuals to grow, live in and contribute meaning-fully to the development and advancement of the society. For that reason, nations the world over usually put the best of their earnings in the education of the young people [1]. They know that the future of the adult society depends on the type of education made available to children. In spite of this, hu-man beings are always dissatisfied with the type of education available.

The debate on standard of education in Nigeria has been on for years. Some scholars are sure the standard has fallen; others feel that there is no scientific basis for such a conclusion. Consensus is hardly reached on whether or not the standard of primary education has fallen, because of the absence of universally accepted indices to measure the standard. When people say that the standard of education has fallen, it seems what they are saying is that schools in the past were able to bring forth better quality individuals than they are able to do now. To a layman, it means that the quality of education the primary schools are giving is deteriorating, and that, correspondingly, their products are deteriorating in terms of knowledge and the marketable skills they have built up. To them, it also means that individuals who passed through primary schools in the 1950s and the 1960s were better equipped than those being turned out today [2];[3]& [4].

Consequently, elites such as [5] opined that there is no scientific basis for passing a judgement that standard has fallen. They strongly assert that in the 1950s and 1960s, people were already mature before entering primary schools. These elites further affirm that in some areas of the country, some primary school learners were already married men and women. It is common knowledge today that most children complete their primary school education at or before the age 12.

The school subjects were fewer in the 1950s and 1960s. Learners covered very limited content areas which were not as varied and as wide especially in the area of the sciences as the children are exposed to today. From the fore-going, it is obvious that there is no basis for comparison. Considering their age levels and all they have to learn, the primary school learner of today is being more greatly challenged. If one attempts to take a closer look at what is obtainable in the curriculum contents of primary education today, one would be surprised to realize that the primary school products of today are far more exposed to such areas of knowledge as mathematics and the sciences than their counterparts of the past decades [6]; [7] &[4]. The standard of education should be judged against the background of who the child is and the realities of his own world.

The term "standard" according to [4] connotes the existence of a measure, a yardstick or criterion of achievement. Standard of education invariably infers that there are certain basic criteria that education must meet, and when they are not met, then one can conclude that the standard has fallen. According to [8], [9] and [10], the following broad areas should be considered while thinking of standard:

The characteristics of the child who goes to school - his age, cognitive maturity; quantity and quality of the physical facilities and equipment available in school for learning; Numbers, quality and devotion to duty of teachers; the contents of the school curriculum; the process of evaluation and the quality and utilization of the products of the education system. Adapted from [4 .p. 369].

All of the above should be duly considered before making a value-judgement on the standard of primary education in Nigeria. It is therefore the concern of this paper to examine the following areas in her discourse:

- History of primary education in Nigeria.
- Measurement of minimum standards in primary education.
- Recipe for standard in primary education and general quality control.
- Conclusion and recommendations.

II. History of Primary Education In Nigeria

Primary education is the education given to children who are aged six to eleven years and above in an institution [11]. In Nigeria and elsewhere, the primary level is the foundation upon which the rest of the educational system is built and succinctly serves as the building block for other forms of education.

Formal education in Nigeria has its roots in the colonial education system and prior to Nigerian independence, the objectives made manifest in the curriculum reflected the demand of the colonial administration. In the primary schools, the content of school education was summarized into syllabi. The syllabus was prepared by each State Ministry of Education, while teachers merely copied the syllabus into dairies according to the terms in the school years. In some cases, the syllabus was not readily available and the teachers would use the prescribed textbooks as syllabus and the topics were taught following the sequencing of the topics or lessons as presented in the text[12].

The Nigerian colonial education was not designed to address the social and cultural needs and aspirations of the Nigerian society. The curriculum content reflected the goals and aspirations of the colonialists. [13] asserted that the colonial education curriculum was elitist in goal, content, organization and administration which invariably resulted in the communal integrative and egalitarian philosophy of the traditional Nigerian communities.

About 1969, it was felt that the curriculum of colonial education was not adequate for Nigeria to develop and to sustain development in the areas of science, technology, commerce and industry. Hence, the National Curriculum Conference was held to redefine education in Nigeria within the context of the Nigerian aims and aspirations.

The result of that conference led to the formulation of the National Policy on Education [11]. The revised policy has spelt out the basic broad general objectives for primary education, they include:

- 1) the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;
- 2) the laying of sound basis for scientific and effective thinking;
- 3) citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- 4) giving the child the opportunity for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limit of his capacity;
- 5) developing in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment;
- 6) providing basic tools for further educational advancement including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality. [11: 12].

Before the late 1970s, there were no such laid out broad objectives to challenge the primary school system in the country. Equally, the 12 years old Nigerian child of the 1950s or 1960s was not mature in outlook, sharp of wit, social and skillful as the 12 year old child of today. It is obvious that education makes and changes a person. If a child of today is qualitatively better than a child of the corresponding age level of the past years, then today's children are not receiving inferior standard of education [17] & {(15}.

III. Measurement of Minimum Standards In Primary Education

Education is widely regarded as a veritable instrument for social change, national development and national integration. The fact remains that since the society and its many structures and institutions are subject to constant change, the educational process which serves as an engine of change must be dynamic and sensitive to societal expectations, aspirations and goals. There is need to constantly review, update and upgrade all existing tools which are at the disposal of educational planners, school administrators, inspectors, teachers and other implementers of school programmes [16].

The major role of the Federal Inspectorate Service (F.I.S.) is firmly rooted in inspection, monitoring and evaluation of schools. These functions are put in place to determine whether the policy guidelines set in motion are implemented for the achievement of objectives of education to ensure that the set minimum

standards are maintained. Hence, the FIS in collaboration with other relevant bodies such as Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), National Commission for Colleges of Education. (NCCE), National Teachers' Institute (NTI) and West African Examinations Council (WAEC); have the following responsibilities, among others:

- 1) production of guidelines on minimum standards for primary and secondary schools nationwide;
- 2) determining the educational standard to be expected of the child on completion of his/her period of stay in the school terms of the acquired certificate;
- 3) determining whether or not the standard of education is actually falling;
- 4) determining whether or not schools are achieving the set educational goals and objectives [16:216].

It should however, be noted that the aim of this policy are yet to be attainable. In a deliberate effort to ensure quality in the Nigerian primary school system, two broad areas have been identified for measuring minimum standards in our schools. [17] submits them this way:

(a) Infrastructural Facilities: Decree 16 of 1985 has clearly stipulated the guidelines on infrastructure/physical facilities including measurements for both primary and secondary schools. In this regard, emphasis is to be placed on ensuring that the classroom or school, which constitutes the learning environment, should be stimulating and child friendly.

(b) Curriculum Contents: The contents of the curriculum must always be based on the National Policy on Education. The policy document contains a list of all the subjects offered at the primary schools.

(p.4.).

In addition, the curriculum reflects the classroom pupil-teacher ratio and pupil teacher relationship approach in terms of teaching support, material (textbooks, teachers' guide, workbook, laboratory manual, exercise books and other writing materials etc.), learning aids/resource materials, teachers' teaching style and techniques (e.g. use of questioning technique) and teaching effectiveness (Ekpo, 2008).

Further, and for effective teaching, it is stressed that the minimum qualification for a primary school teacher should be the Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE). The training of the pre-service students (NCE, degree) is aimed at the mastery of knowledge of the subject matter, including the contents of the curriculum of the primary schools. Trainees must have adequate mastery of the effective ways of teaching the numerous subjects at the primary school level. A teacher, for example must be able to identify a teaching method or approach that would be most appropriate for teaching a particular subject matter. For instance, the teaching of verbs can best be done by separating them into the regular and irregular forms and teaching with sufficient examples to emphasize the distinctions. Therefore, to be able to give a value judgment on standard, the inspector is required to closely examine the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum and point out the lapses, if any. Conversely, if these things are not put in place, why so much noise on falling standard of education?

IV. Recipe For Standard In Primary Education And General Quality Control

From our discourse thus far, we perceive that what is happening to the Nigerian primary school education is not a fall in standard as is often said. The problem is the existence of a gap between what is expected; based on the broad national objectives for primary education and what is being observed. We will not also hesitate to suggest the way forward. It is simply to raise the observed to the level of the expected and invariably close the gap between them.

In addition, to closing the gap, one has to first establish or define what standard is expected of primary education in Nigeria. [10] recommended the Human Talent Approach (HTA) in the establishment of educational standard in Nigeria. In this approach, emphasis is on the extent to which the purposes for which schools are established are satisfied. For instance, some psychological tools could be used to measure the extent to which a child who has passed through the primary school possesses the quality expected of him as implied in the broad national objectives for education. Akinboye concluded that based on this, and if a school makes adequate impact on the individuals who pass through it, then that school has maintained standard.

In Nigeria presently, the impact primary schools make on pupils has been grossly inadequate due to the following reasons:

(i) School Population Increase - Population explosion in the primary schools emerged with the launching of the Universal Primary Education Scheme in 1975. It brought about profits increase in school enrolment without adequate teacher production to match the school population [19] & [20]. This increase led to overcrowded classrooms which are experienced today in all levels of education in Nigeria. Precisely at Independence in 1960, the population of primary school pupils in Nigeria was 2,912,600. By 1970, it was about 3,894,500. Ten years after the launching of the UPE (1975), the estimated population of primary school learners was about 20 million, an astronomical rise of about 16 million.

Today, there may be up to 24 million Nigerians in primary schools [4]. It is therefore important to note that the physical facilities and equipment as well as number of teachers do not rise or increase, so the school system has overstretched equipment and over-tasked the teachers.

(ii) Shortage of Quality Teachers: A quality teacher is a major stakeholder in ensuring minimum standard in the school system. He is in a better position than any other person to know the learners, their needs and characteristics. A qualified and professionally trained teacher should be able to detect any organizational fault in the curriculum and be able to effect changes. The teacher is a guide for learning, a motivator, and facilitator of learning. Currently, teachers are not enough for the number of learners in schools and many of those teaching are not even qualified to be on the job [21] & [22].

Further, [26] presents data to show pupils teacher ratio of 452:1. This is abnormally high. The table clearly shows that 27 schools, ie. 27 out of 31 local government areas of Akwa Ibom State suffer acute shortage of teachers at the primary school. See table for confirmation.

Table 1: Summary of Akwa Ibom State 2nd Term Pupil's Enrolment for 2015/2016 Academic year

S/N	Local Government Area (LG)	No. of Schools	No. of Teachers			Pupils Enrolment			Teacher pupils Ratio
			Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	Abak	43	226	619	845	18049	18904	36953	1:44
2	Eastern Obolo	11	26	19	45	9808	10516	20324	1:452
3	Eket	29	43	414	457	17685	19344	37029	1:81
4	Esit Eket	16	71	121	192	7852	8512	16364	1:85
5	Essien Udium	55	224	490	714	27203	27990	55193	1:77
6	Etim Ekpo	43	169	326	495	26440	29587	56027	1:113
7	Etinan	41	109	464	573	15320	19361	34681	1:61
8	Ibeno	12	26	77	103	7801	8292	16093	1:56
9	Ibesikpo Asutan	51	147	510	657	14653	14706	29359	1:45
10	Ibiono Ibom	63	226	569	795	23459	24055	47514	1:60
11	Ika	18	124	172	296	12847	14086	26933	1:91
12	Ikono	59	179	439	618	21211	23187	44398	1:72
13	Ikot Abasi	35	25	225	250	15435	16437	31872	1:127
14	Ikot Ekpene	36	111	677	788	17127	19024	36151	1:46
15	Ini	55	210	225	435	28543	29080	57623	1:132
16	Itu	38	103	609	712	15225	15918	31143	1:44
17	Mbo	29	169	255	424	19371	7566	36937	1:87
18	Mkpat Enin	49	130	322	452	17614	20110	37724	1:83
19	Nsit Atai	25	66	109	175	11865	12288	24153	1:138
20	Nsit Ibom	34	118	350	468	13564	12703	26267	1:56
21	Nsit Ubium	38	108	285	393	16105	16090	32195	1:82
22	Obot Akara	38	149	199	348	17011	16809	33820	1:97
23	Okobo	32	255	260	515	17925	19398	37323	1:72
24	Onna	28	57	216	273	15205	16412	31617	1:116
25	Oron	13	31	297	328	8381	8947	17328	1:53
26	Uruk Anam	75	286	444	730	26015	28085	54100	1:74
27	Udung Uko	11	45	91	136	7446	7616	15062	1:111
28	Ukanafun	64	239	495	734	21874	24123	45997	1:63
29	Uruan	45	126	284	410	14749	18212	32961	1:80
30	Urue Ofong	21	117	216	333	10404	12686	23090	1:69
31	Uyo	47	136	940	1076	25863	26479	52342	1:49
	Total	1154	4051	10719	14770	52205	556523	1078573	1:73

Source: State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Uyo.

(iii) Inexperienced School Administrators: In the ministries and schools, it does appear that brain drain has left a dearth of quality administrators. Some of those who now make top decisions on education, inspect or head schools do not have basic professional training or adequate exposure in education [3]. The school system is therefore impoverished by poor quality leadership and wrong decisions taken by those at the helm of affairs.

(iv) Characteristics of Learners: In the school enrolment of children, their characteristics are not exactly taken into consideration. For instance, their ages, physical health, cognitive maturity, cognitive styles, attitudes, home background, outlook and perception are not considered when they are enrolled and conflicts in these areas breed sub-standards.

(v) Poor Physical Facilities and Equipment: Any form of learning in an impoverished learning environment will make the learners unmotivated and the result is low quality. This scenario is very common in rural areas, because down there are found dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs, bare floors and absence of desks, reading materials and other necessary items.

(vi) **Poor Funding:** If government could release adequate funds into the school system, many of the identified problems will disappear. Without sufficient inflow of funds, quality primary education remains a facade. A call is therefore made for at least 25% of the nation's annual budget to be directed to education.

V. Recommendations

Based on the trend of the discourse, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Government should make provisions for increase in the number of adequately trained and talented teachers, who should be adequately motivated.
2. Government should equally provide for continuous self-growth of teachers and school administrators through in-service training, workshops and conferences; as well as the encouragement of the reading culture among them.
3. Government should provide for prompt payment of teachers' allowances and salaries as a routine means of continuous reinforcement of their labour.
4. Teachers and other service providers in the primary education sector should encourage cheating-free evaluation of learners' progress and ensure that only children who have reached a given level of maturity are allowed to move into the next higher level or class.
5. Government should provide for adequate educational leadership by putting the right personnel in the right places.
6. Government should provide for adequate inspection and supervision of educational programmes to ensure excellence, personnel devotion and seriousness of purpose on the part of the learners, teachers, primary school administrators.

VI. Conclusion

Guidelines on minimum standards and quality control in education are an important national issue. The concern on standard hinges on the quality of instruction children are receiving, the quality of the learning environment, lack of devotion on the part of teachers and poor motivation for learning among the pupils. The key factor in the existence of the status-quo is unmistakably the inadequate flow of fund into the school system. The establishment of the enabling environment needed for teaching and learning to take place requires money. Incentives to teachers through adequate salaries and allowances and their regular payments depend on the availability of fund. Therefore, the Nigerian government is urged to take a courageous step to deal with funding once and for all if minimum standards are to be maintained at the primary level of education.

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