

Full Length Research Paper

Falling standard in Nigeria education: traceable to proper skills-acquisition in schools?

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The researcher wondered whether the hue and cry about falling standard in education in Nigeria could be linked to skills-acquisition at school. When appropriate skills are lacking in any production system, the outcome is poor quality output, which undermines capacity building and sustainable development in any nation. This study therefore examined the indices of development and practices in implementing Nigeria's school curricula to determine whether indeed education standard is falling and whether the observed poor quality education at all levels was due mainly to the way and manner by which skills-acquisition in school is implemented. A survey was therefore carried out in Warri metropolis of Delta State, using a sample of 522 subjects, comprising 42 government officials, 61 employers of labour, 87 parents, 203 teachers, and 129 students. It was found that standard in education is falling at all levels as a result of inadequate acquisition of skills due mainly to poor implementation of school curricula. A remedial package was articulated for better outcomes amongst which are rejuvenation of educational objectives and routes to implementation and utilization of research findings to improve upon educational practices.

Keywords: Education, Falling Standard, Skill Acquisition, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, education much more than any other social service in Nigeria has attracted much public discussion. This is because the society and the government are concerned about the quality of its education since a nation's overall development is inextricably tied to its educational system. Top on the list is the falling standard of education in Nigeria. Without mincing words, Nigerians, both the leadership and followership have come to accept the bare truth that Nigeria is not developing as it ought to since independence in October, 1960. This perhaps explains why government has moved from one system of education structure to another in search of excellence in its educational products. It would be recalled that Nigeria's education system has changed from the colonial 8-5-2-3 to the after-independence 6-5-2-3, to the erstwhile 6-3-3-4, and now the 9-3-4 basic education structure. Despite the fact that the 9-3-4 structure is yet to take off in most States of the Federation, people are beginning to fear yet another failure as recorded in the 6-3-3-4 structure, and are asking for the old 6-5-2-3 structure which according to them produced the "well-baked" Nigerian scholars of yesteryears whose

contributions to national development is seemingly being eroded instead of being built-upon by education's products of today (Enworom, 1994; Adeyegbe, 2002; Anya, 2003; Oderinde, 2003; Onipede, 2003; Adeyemi, 2005; Ogum, 2007).

There is a general worry about the poor quality of education outputs in Nigeria. People including non-Nigerians, scholars, and researchers have pointed to the declining performance of graduates from the education system relative to what obtained in the past especially in terms of reading, writing, and practical skills (Obasi, 1980; Enworom, 1994; Adeyemi, 2005; Ogum, 2007). A sordid example is the case of a master's degree student in the researcher's class of Educational Research Methods who wrote "jargon" (could not even spell her name correctly) in two successive examinations! One begins to wonder how that student got to the master's level. There are many of such students and graduates in Nigeria (Obasi, 1980; Salami, 1992; Anya, 2003; Onipede, 2003; Ogum, 2007). The researcher's late grandmother was a school teacher with only primary six certificate qualification but she could read and write better and explain herself better in excellent English than

many university graduates of today. This pitiable situation could perhaps be more appreciated by this extract from a renowned Nigerian scholar and research fellow who feared that the worst was yet to come in Nigeria's education (Enworom, 1994:27):

Nigerian federal and state governments have to grapple with the present dysfunctional system of secondary education which has continued to produce "bookfull block-heads, ignorantly read, with loaded lumbers in their brains." Most Nigerian high school graduates are no longer able to write or read letters, let alone read and understand newspapers. The university graduates have become a reserve army of the unemployable. Yet federal and state governments have continued to flood Nigeria with colleges and universities that will fabricate and mass-produce students for non-existing jobs.

Some of the reasons adduced for this state of affairs include the declining competence and commitment of teachers; inadequate provision of facilities; non-maintenance of available facilities; outdated and largely irrelevant curricula; parents' nonchalance to children's schoolwork/activities; lack of interest and seriousness on the part of students which lead to examination malpractice; the cankerworm of the "get-rich-quick" syndrome of the Nigerian youths of today; and the lost glories of traditional education which flourished on the appropriate acquisition and utilization of skills.

There is no doubt however, that in quantitative terms, education in Nigeria has prospered with enrolments at all levels increasing in leaps and bounds as well as expansions in numbers and types of educational institutions. There is also no doubt that the search for quality education or academic excellence remains a huge task for Nigeria. The main thrust of the much favoured and politicized erstwhile 6-3-3-4 system is towards improving the quality of education, and its successful implementation depends mostly on the quality and commitment of the teachers. Many researchers have warned that such commitment from teachers would not materialize if the society and government continued to despise teachers and treat them as underdogs of the economy and socio-political system (Salami, 1992; Udoidem, 1992; Enworom, 1994; Anya, 2003; Onipede, 2003; Duze, 2004). That is perhaps the reason the system failed in Nigeria. It is sad to note that today, successive Nigerian governments have failed to accept this important role of teachers in achieving quality goals in education. They reach and breach agreements with all levels of teachers' unions towards improving their conditions of service and their tools for service. Research has indicated the need to qualitatively improve the curricula, to provide high quality educational facilities, to increase the supply of qualified teachers and most importantly, to encourage and motivate teachers if quality output must be obtained from the system (Ubokobong, 1993; Bello, 2000; Duze, 2004; Ogum, 2007).

The private sector has become involved in providing placement in education at all levels in Nigeria, with government holding regulatory powers. It is meant to provide healthy competition of schools. But they are no much better since they also operate under the vagaries of the Nigerian circumstance where so much is done on paper but very little done at implementation. Consequently, the issue of academic excellence continues to elude Nigeria (Obasi, 1980; Adeyegbe, 2002; Anya, 2003; Oderinde, 2003; Onipede, 2003; Duze, 2004; Okolocha and Ile, 2005; Ogum, 2007). Evidences abound concerning the continued poor performance of students at all levels of education. For instance, Adeyemi (2005) observed that the performance of students in English Language, mathematics, and Integrated Science over a period of four years (2000-2003) was low and there was no year where the performance level was up to fifty percent in any Junior Secondary Certificate examinations. This was also the case for SSC examinations in all the subjects. Similarly, poor performance was continuously found by different researchers at the secondary level (Enworom, 1994; Okoroma, 2002; West African Examinations Council, 2002; Utibe-Abasi, 2003; Duze, 2004; Adeyemi, 2005) and tertiary level (Ubokobong, 1993; Bello, 2000; Okolocha and Ile, 2005; Ogum, 2007).

It is pertinent to note that Nigeria has not invested heavily in education in recent years despite massive expansions in this sector. It would be recalled that UNESCO in ASUU (2002) recommended that countries should commit at least 26 percent of budgetary allocation to education. But the highest Nigeria has gone in recent years was 11.12 percent in 1999. Other years were 2000 (8.36%), 2001 (7.0%), 2002 (5.9%), 2003 (1.83%) and 2004 (10.5%). Also, Akpochafo and Akpochafo (2005) noted that Nigeria has never spent up to 15 percent of its annual budget on education since Independence in 1960, portraying how poorly committed the country is to education, and yet craves to be developed. According to them, the beauty of democracy and its dividends could be realized if only the leaders and the led, the elected and the electorate, and the government and the governed were qualitatively educated.

It is disquieting to note that when it comes to implementing the variables or factors that yield quality education, Nigeria tends to drag its feet, yet the goals of education as enshrined in her National Policy on Education (2004), point to quality education via the appropriate acquisition of knowledge and skills at all levels. Besides, Nigeria participated in the famous Jomtien World Conference in March 1990, on "Education For All" (EFA) by the year 2000. EFA unequivocally emphasizes education of good quality for life-long living through a major strategy of practical skill acquisition. At the April 2000 EFA forum in Dakar, Nigeria together with other countries moved the EFA target year from 2000 to 2015. It is 2009 today, and Nigeria has nothing to show

towards achieving the EFA's lofty goals besides the change in the nomenclature and structure of the educational system, from the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of the 6-3-3-4 system to the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of the 9-3-4 system.

Though people see the UBE, launched in Nigeria in 1999, as one of Nigeria's response to EFA, the then Minister for Education, Professor Fabian Nwosu, drove a 6-inch nail into that by declaring that EFA was unachievable by the year 2015. He could be saying the bare truth because from observations and available statistics, it appears that Nigeria still has much to do to meet the new target, but it is worrisome if the "giant of Africa" cannot do in education what the "grasshoppers" (if we may use the biblical antonym) in Africa (Gambia, Gabon, Ghana, Tanzania, Togo, Mauritius, Libya, etc.) are doing relatively well. That Nigeria was ranked 151st among 174 countries on the most recent HDR ranking implies a situation of absolute poverty, which Anya (2003) declared as dreary and uncheering. Poverty is linked with underdevelopment. In traditional societies of Nigeria, notably among the Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria, poverty is seen to be a curse and a taboo, and therefore seriously dreaded and avoided by individuals, families, and clans. No stones were left unturned to make sure that they were not classified as poor! That was why the length and breadth and height of a man's yam barn, for instance, made him a village chief!

In Nigeria, evidences of development and modernization, such as access to water and power, access to health care, good roads, good transport/communication systems, life expectancy, fertility rates, infant mortality, school enrolment, school maintenance, and food deficit position, all point in the wrong direction and paint a picture of a nation in distress, a nation where poverty, hunger and disease leave the masses in horror conditions, a nation not developed in which the indices of development as listed by Udoidem (1992) are yet to manifest:

- A reduction of the level of unemployment
- A reduction of the extent of personal and regional inequality
- A reduction of the level of absolute poverty
- A rise in the real output of goods and services and the improvement of the techniques of production
- Improvement in literacy, health services, housing conditions and government services
- Improvement in the social and political consciousness of the people; and
- Greater ability to draw on local resources (human and material) to meet local needs, that is, becoming self-reliant.

It is globally accepted that these indices of development can be largely achieved if the citizens of a nation received good quality education which makes them productively functional leading to the continued or sustained health and wealth of the individual and the

nation. We can therefore safely argue in this study that the extent of achievement of these indices is a reflection of the amount of knowledge and skill acquired in school. Adequate and proper acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills in school subjects and disciplines of study is invariably a function of Quality Education. A reality we cannot close our sight to, is that no matter how lofty, how enviable, how laudable, how gigantic, the education goals are, or how relevant the school curriculum is organized in achieving education's goals, success in their attainment lies with implementation. The traditional societies never played nor joked with the way and manner of transmitting knowledge and transferring skills to the young ones – here, implementation in knowledge/skill acquisition was thorough and celebrated. The question now is, has formal education failed in producing quality education because of the way and manner implementation of policies and programmes were handled? Is the falling standard in Nigeria education traceable to skills-acquisition? Herein lies the problem of this study.

If there are still doubts in the minds of Nigerians about the falling standard in education at all levels in Nigeria, an assessment of the indices of development noted above could reveal the state of affairs. Specifically, the study would determine whether indeed standard of education is falling at all levels and whether this is traceable to skills-acquisition in schools, and whether the mode of implementation is largely responsible for poor skills-acquisition in schools. It is in this light that this study sought the perceptions of all stakeholders in education in Warri metropolis of Delta State, Nigeria. Warri metropolis is a large oil-rich urban/sub-urban city located in the Niger Delta Region of Delta State, Nigeria. It has many local and international companies with highly educated employees as well many public and private primary and secondary schools, a number of higher institutions, and some Local Government headquarters and State and Federal government offices/branches of the Ministries and Boards of Education. Most parents here could be said to be educated.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is a survey which sought the perceptions of the general public on the issues of standards in education vis-à-vis national development. The population was a heterogeneous composition of all stakeholders in education in Warri metropolis of Delta State of Nigeria, comprising government officials, employers of labour, parents, teachers, and students. 1,000 copies of the data collection instrument were sent out and 702 retrieved, out of which only 614 were properly completed. A sample of 522 subjects was then selected through stratified random sampling to cater for the differing numerical strengths of respondents. This comprised 42 government officials, 61 employers of labour, 87 parents, 203 teachers, and 129

students. The instrument was a structured questionnaire made up a total of 50 sub-items in ten development/curricular-related areas. While section A of the instrument sought for demographic information, section B elicited information on perceptions of respondents on the indices of development and mode of curricular implementation in schools in Nigeria. Scoring was through a 4-point Likert-scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, to which the highest score of 4 points was assigned to strongly agree and lowest of 1 point to strongly disagree for positively worded items. The reverse was the case for negatively worded items. Mean scores of 2.5 and above were considered to be positively disposed to items investigated. The instrument was validated by a jury of experts drawn from education and industry, with a computed reliability coefficient of 0.82 derived through test-retest method, adopted as satisfactory. Data collected were analyzed using the statistical mean.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis, presented in Table 1, are quite self-explanatory.

Very remarkable are results of items 1 and 10 were all categories of respondents strongly disagreed that there was a reduction of the level of unemployment and strongly agreed that adequate skills were not acquired in schools as a result of poor implementation of programmes. Also, all employers of labour and all teachers strongly disagreed that there was a rise in the real output of goods and services and the improvement of the techniques of production. In the same vein, no item was rated up to the 2.50 minimum accepted for a positive disposition by all categories of respondents. For instance, items 3 and 7 with tied grand means of 1.14 indicated that Nigerians are living in abject poverty and her educational outputs are not self-reliant. The next lowest grand mean score of 1.23 indicated that standard in education is falling in Nigeria with the university level most hit. This they all agreed was as a result of inadequate skill acquisition in school. Next from the bottom is item 4 with a grand mean of 1.31 closely followed by item 9 with grand mean of 1.32. These indicated no rise in the real output of goods and services and the improvement of the techniques of production as perceived by parents, students, and government officials were in line with teachers and employers of labour, and that the curriculum at all levels did not include appreciable room for skill acquisition. Next is item 5 with a grand mean score of 1.49 indicating that there is no improvement in literacy, health services, housing conditions and government services. The grand mean scores of 2.05 and 2.15 recorded for items 2 and 6 respectively, though a bit higher than the others, still did not hit the minimum approved positive disposition,

meaning that there was no reduction of the extent of personal and regional inequality and no improvement in the social and political consciousness of Nigerians.

The results also showed that while government officials recorded the highest average mean score of 1.57, teachers recorded the least of 1.29, followed by employers of labour (1.32), parents (1.33) and students (1.38). This trend is understandable when one considers the fact that government is adjudged to be largely the producer of education in Nigeria while the other categories are largely the consumers. Though education providers like government would tend to justify themselves, it was observed in this study that government was quite honest in their responses with a mean score of 1.57 not up to the acceptable 2.50. This indicated that besides their positions as policy makers, they were also experiencing the maladies of the Nigerian educational system. On the other hand, teachers always bear the highest brunt of the evils that bedevil the education system in Nigeria. They are in the middle of the web from any direction taken. They suffer the inadequacies in the provision, allocation, utilization, maintenance, etc of all the necessary inputs (human and Physical) in the education system, so they know where it hurts badly. They handle the processing aspect in the production line, and they can only use what was made available for the production process, and so, would understand better the status of the end-product. When poor products get into the labour market, buyers who are the employers of labour would soon begin to notice the flaws. That probably explains the next lowest average mean score of 1.32 recorded by them.

On the whole no average mean score and grand mean score for all the categories met the minimum of 2.50 for positive disposition to the issues investigated. This meant that the standard of education in Nigeria is falling at all levels as a result of inadequate skills-acquisition which in turn is due to the poor implementation strategies, thus accomplishing the two objectives that guided the study. When this scenario in formal education is compared with education in traditional African or Nigerian communities, one marvels at the apparent lack of wisdom employed at implementation. For example, in traditional societies, the yam farmer, for instance, cannot send his son to the bush without the necessary farm implements/tools needed for work, as well as provision of food, shelter, and defense from wild animals and medication for snake bites. They even prepare and carry along with them every day to the farm the fresh concoctions for snake-bites and farm-tool injuries. They do not wait until they get back home before receiving treatment thus affording security and confidence (a condition of service) to young farmers (learners) as well as their parents (teachers). These are worth a thought!

Table 1. Mean Scores of Respondents to Indices of Development and Mode of Curricular Implementation of Skills-Acquisition in Nigerian Schools

S/N	Items	Govt. Officials	Employers of labour	Parents	Teachers	Students	Grand Mean
1	There is a reduction of level of unemployment of Nigerian school leavers	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
2	There is a reduction of the extent of personal and regional inequality	2.05	2.00	1.98	2.16	2.03	2.05
3	There is a reduction of the level of absolute poverty	1.22	1.20	1.08	1.13	1.08	1.14
4	There is a rise in the real output of goods and services and the improvement of the techniques of production	2.00	1.00	1.42	1.00	1.12	1.31
5	There is improvement in literacy, health services, housing conditions, and government services	2.09	1.70	1.20	1.11	1.37	1.49
6	There is improvement in the social and political consciousness of the people	2.23	2.06	1.95	2.00	2.21	2.15
7	There is greater ability of educated people to draw on local resources to meet local needs, that is, becoming self-reliant	1.20	1.03	1.12	1.15	1.18	1.14
8	Standard in education is falling at all levels in Nigeria as a result of inadequate skills-acquisition	1.18	1.10	1.21	1.13	1.55	1.23
9	The curriculum at all levels does not include appreciable room for skill acquisition	1.70	1.12	1.33	1.18	1.26	1.32
10	Adequate skills are not acquired from formal education due to the myriads of problems associated with implementation of policies and programmes.	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Average Mean	1.57	1.32	1.33	1.29	1.38	1.38

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that standards in education are actually falling in Nigeria at all levels as a result of inadequate skills-acquisition at school due mainly to the poor implementation of educational policies and programmes. Invariably, the products of her educational system will be ill-equipped for effective contribution to economic growth and national development. The growing complexity of the school system and difficulty in administering the school system (implementation) have arisen from the population explosions at all levels, expansion without modernization in school types, accompanied with the relatively dwindling budgetary allocations, poor curricular dynamics to reflect the changing needs of the society, poor teaching/learning facilities that increase academic stress, and non-utilization of research findings in solving education problems. These factors adversely affect the production of high-level manpower which controls the highly

sophisticated global economic sector. If the education sector in Nigeria fails, then capacity building and sustainable development in Nigeria also fails. It could result into an unwholesome vicious cycle which could keep national development stagnant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Two specific recommendations were made towards the attainment of quality education which would enhance capacity building and sustainable development in Nigeria. First is rectification of the shortcomings of our educational system with a willingness as well as commitment on the part of everyone (government, private sector, teachers, students, parents, leaders) to join hands to implement effectively and efficiently the educational policies and programmes and thereby sustain a more relevant system. Areas to re-visit include, financing of education which has been poorly done in Nigeria; relevant curricula

reforms with emphasis on science/technology, vocational, and entrepreneurship education; school discipline which determines the extent of conducive and enabling environment for academic activities and successes; school ownership, since in Nigeria academic quality or performance has been found to correlate with ownership of school; teacher education necessary to overcome the gross inadequacy in quality and quantity of teachers at especially at the secondary level for science/technology subjects; establishment of a stronger awareness between education and self-discipline, self-reliance, and self-fulfillment (which is what traditional education stands out for); and the mentality of the Nigerian society itself towards obsession with white or blue collar jobs and dislike for technical/vocational courses. Second is the judicious adoption and implementation of research findings and evaluations that would enhance the quality of educational practices at all levels in Nigeria.

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