

MINIMUM STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM



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MINIMUM STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY ON PRE-PRIMARY & PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Lack of quality in contemporary practice in education has led to several attempts at making education received by children in Nigeria worthwhile. These attempts include the idea of establishing minimum standards for all levels of education. Minimum standards are seen as working at the university level but for the pre-primary and primary levels, minimum standards are only inferred. Problems caused by lack of enforced minimum standards at these levels are discussed as hazardous to current practice of pre-primary and primary education in Nigeria.

Introduction

For the past two decades, there has been heated arguments as regard the standard of Nigerian education. Some hold the view that standards have fallen (Nwana, 1966, Makinwa 1979, Ukeje, 1979), while others argue that there are only some disparities between the provision and expectations of the people. In other words, standards have not fallen (Isangedighi 1995, Ekanem 2001). In fact, those who hold the latter view, hold also that instead standards have risen from what they used to be. This debate has arisen because of the public and private concern for education. The same concern can be seen in parents scouting round for "the best school in town" for their children. They would pay exorbitantly to make sure that their children are given the best education possible.

This search is more pronounced at the pre-primary and primary school levels. One therefore cannot wonder about the springing up of the several "International Nursery and Primary Schools" in almost every location in Nigeria. The trend used to be an urban syndrome but it is gradually spreading to the rural areas. Of all these, what is the blueprint which governs the establishment of these schools? Are the standards the same such that there is

inferred regulation of their activities? Of what significance would pre-determined standards be to the provision of Nursery and Primary education in Nigeria? What would the lack of pre-determined standards connote? This paper will address the above problems after throwing some light on the concept of minimum standard and accountability.

The Concept of Minimum Standards and accountability

Minimum standards refer to predetermined standards which set the yardstick for each organisation. In the case of an educational system, it takes into consideration the curriculum, staffing facilities and the like. Minimum standards mark only the lower limits below which no organisation under review can operate. It also provides a silent yardstick with which to measure how far the minimum has grown in some other establishments.

The question of minimum standards is tied to the concept of quality as it ensures maintenance of a particular level of quality. It also encourages competitions among operating establishments as regards how far minimum they have gone. Abdulkadir (1989) states that the question of minimum standards in the Nigerian system of education was brought to be by Decree 16 and 19 of 1985. According to him, the essence was to save the system from total collapse. The above decree provided for setting up of minimum standards and accreditation exercises at all levels of their educational system in Nigeria.

As can be observed, the provision has reached advanced stage for the tertiary level of education as universities, polytechnics and Colleges of Education have had accreditation visits with some reports already in print (NUC 2002). For the secondary, primary and pre-primary levels, the establishment of minimum standards is inadequately pursued since the inspectorate which is charged with the maintenance of standards at these levels is ineffective.

Accountability refers to the provision of a satisfactory report of actions taken, money spent and events which have taken place. Hornby (2000:9) refers to accountability as the noun derived from the adjective accountable which means "to give an explanation of one's actions", expenditure and the like, or simply put, to be responsible for something. The issue of accountability is also closely linked with that of minimum standards. This is so because while the latter (minimum standards) provides guideline, and

purpose for action, the former (accountability) provides evidence and record for action taken. Accountability can also measure the extent to which a task has been done and provide impetus for further action.

Minimum Standards for Pre-Primary and Primary Education

The provision of pre-primary and primary education relies basically on the National Policy on Education (1977, 81 and 98). Here goals and purposes are set, modes of operation defined and the different subject areas spelt out. Furthermore, curricula for different subjects have been developed especially for the primary school level. Much still needs to be done to bring the status of the pre-primary level to the same status as the primary. Routine inspections are expected to be carried out from time to time to ensure compliance. This is inferred to provide for accreditation. The above can be said to be the picture of the pre-primary and primary levels of education as far as provision of minimum standards are concerned.

In the National Policy (NPE, 1998), government "encourages" by handing hands over the provision of pre-primary education to the private sector. Thus pre-primary and even primary schools are opened and run as business ventures. The observed trend is that "anybody who has an uncompleted building, a garage or a building of whatever nature can bring in young children and call it a nursery school" (Obinaju, 1996). The above cited author is also of the opinion that the Nigerian education system has been too loose with standards for opening and running pre-primary and primary institutions. This has led to the observed disparity in space provision, facility and quality of instruction found among pre-primary and privately owned primary schools (Obinaju, 1994 and Isangedihi 1995). The disparity has been of much concern such that Onibokun (1985) and Obinaju (1994) have called on the government to set up minimum standards which would set a bench mark for operation for private pre-primary and primary institutions if she does not want to open, and run a few such institutions as models.

The picture is better for primary schools as there are several government-owned primary schools in the country. Although the author would not want to admit that these are yardsticks to go by, these could serve as a spring board on which to start any

meaningful accreditation and an impetus for improvement on standards. So as not to completely neglect the pre-primary sector, there has been a call for a policy which would establish a pre-primary section for each existing government-owned primary school in the country for the benefit of having an opportunity to set models and standards (Obinaju, 2002).

Problems associated with non enforcement of minimum standards in pre-primary and primary schools in Nigeria

We should not lose sight of the fact that pre-primary and primary levels of education are the foundation on which all other strata of Nigerian education rest. Care must therefore be taken so that these levels of education perform their functions. Lack of enforced minimum standards at the pre-primary and primary levels of education has had several devastating consequences which if not checked can jeopardize the entire educational system in Nigeria.

1. Non Uniformity:

Apart from operations in government-owned primary schools, the government cannot ensure and ascertain that the practice in privately owned pre-primary and primary schools is uniform in terms of curriculum, books, methods and equipment. Government cannot even compare operations in these schools with the government-owned primary schools. There is so much disparity among privately-owned pre-primary and primary schools such that the proprietors claim control of operations in their schools even when their knowledge of what is worthwhile is far from acceptable and recommended standards. Disparity is observed in age of admission of children, number of hours spent in school, school subjects, quality of teaching, qualification of teachers, classrooms, space provision, outdoor games facilities and several other quality determinants.

2. Sub-Standard Provision

Owing to lack of enforced minimum standards, some pre-primary and primary institutions actually operate below the stipulations of the National Policy on Education. Almost all of them, for instance, use English language as a medium of instruction from the start. Improper buildings and unqualified teachers are brought into the picture. These practices run contrary to the prescription of the

National Policy (NPE, 1998). These are only some among other measures of sub-standard provision.

3. Exploitation

As observed earlier in this paper, parents now do not trust many institutions. Doubt is created in their minds such that the new pre-occupation is "scouting for good schools" for children, whereas, if accreditation would be possible where minimum standards are enforced. Parents would be sure of which schools meet required standards. Of course, those unable to meet the required standards would be shut.

As this is not the case, those identified by parents as "good schools" for their children, take advantage of parental patronage to exploit them (parents). Unreasonable levies apart from exorbitant school fee are imposed on these parents. Although parents sometimes complain, they end up paying as they believe they have no alternative.

4. Lack of Accountability

Private schools have the problem of accountability. In the first place to whom are they accountable. Those who have the idea of accountability, at all try to render shoddy accounts at Parents Teachers Association meetings of their schools. These meetings are however under their control. To the government who is supposed to be in directly control of education of its citizenry, it is not clear what account is normally given by these sets of proprietors. Education at the pre-primary level mainly suffers lack of monitoring.

Even if we recommend that regular reports be sent by proprietors to government, what are the indications that the content of the reports would reflect actual operations in their schools. If government-owned primary schools operate 3 enrolment registers, one of federal inspectors, one for state inspectors and one for day-to-day running of the school, would the requirement of reports from private entrepreneurs not introduce this level of dishonesty in them.?

5. Unhealthy Rivalry

Among privately owned pre-primary and primary schools, there exists a level of rivalry which may not be in the interest of the children. Each school would want his school to rank tops so that

patronage would be enhanced. This sentiment leads some managements to openly indulge in and encourage examination malpractice so that their pupils would do well and even surpass other schools. Introduction of this level of vice to the children at such tender ages has far reaching implications on the entire education system of the country and the eventual value system of the society.

If carefully examined, all the exposed problems hinge on the lack of enforced minimum standards which will culminate into accountability for pre-primary and primary levels of education in Nigeria.

The Way Forward

There is only one potent recommendation which is already obvious from the fore-gone discussion – that is, the streamlining of the minimum standards as regards academic provision, facilities and mode of operation for pre-primary and primary schools in the country. These minimum standards once developed should be enforced. Lack of and/or improper implementation would serve no purpose. So, there is need for proper implementation of minimum standards once developed. One of the ways of initiating the recommended line of action is by annexing to every existing primary school a pre-primary component so that each school would form an index of implementation for the prescribed minimum standards for pre-primary and primary schools.

Furthermore, accreditation exercise is recommended for all existing privately owned pre-primary and primary institutions with a view to recognizing those which meet the standard and closing down those which fall below the required standard. In these ways, the government would be able to attest to the quality of education received by her citizenry at the pre-primary and primary school levels.

Conclusion

This paper has carefully examined the almost non-existent state of minimum standards for pre-primary and primary schools in the country. This singular phenomenon has been seen as providing impetus for reduced quality and disparity in operation especially among the privately owned nursery and primary schools. A recommendation which would introduce close supervision of educational practice by government at these levels has been

proffered. This is done in recognition that the levels of education in focus form the bedrock of all other educational dispensations in the country. It is hoped that the recommendation will soon be put into practice as it promises to revamp the present status of pre-primary and primary education in the country.

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