

CHALLENGES OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: LOOKING AT CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

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Abstract

The future of our country depends on our children receiving the best instruction. Quality is what is needed to guarantee that best instruction. This paper discusses the conceptual and definitional issues in relation to quality in education. Issues contemporarily at play against quality in education in Nigeria are identified as inadequate funding for education, lack of adequate numbers of teachers and the problem of professionally unqualified teachers, poor physical and social environments of schools, examination malpractice, the tendency for students to study to memorise rather than studying to understand, and lack of professionally trained counsellors. The paper concludes that addressing these issues is strategic to an improved educational quality fundamental to the economic, political, and social development of our country. The paper finally recommends that the first step towards an enhanced quality in education in Nigeria is for the Government to elevate education to the status of the No. 1 priority sector and accordingly demonstrate the political will to appropriate the funds needed to adequately address the deficit of both human and material resources prevalent in the sector.

Keywords: Quality in Education; Quality of Education; Quality Education; and Educational Quality

The preoccupation of educational policymakers has largely been with expanding the quantity of education – at the expense of enhancing quality in education. While the importance of expanding the quantity of education cannot be underrated, actual skills in the classroom are arguably a more important determinant of individual and social returns to education. The *quantity* of children who participate is by definition a secondary consideration. Merely filling spaces called “schools” with children would not even address qualitative objectives if no real education occurred. In an apparent

ascription of preeminence to quality education over *quantity* of education, the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 asserted the need for quality to be achieved in education: “*Improve all aspects of the quality of education to achieve recognized and measurable learning outcomes for all - especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills*” (Dakar Framework for Action, Article 7, World Education Forum, 2000). Similarly, Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recommended that States should make it possible for education to be directed at developing the child’s personality and talents, preparing the child for active life as an adult, fostering respect for basic human rights and developing respect for the child’s own cultural and national values and those of others (United Nations, 1989).

Until recently, the economist regarded physical capital as the most important factor of production with particular reference to economic growth. Economists then recommended that developing countries should significantly increase physical capital formation in order to accelerate the rate at which they achieved economic growth. But in the last three decades, economic research has revealed the need for the *qualitative* development of human skills in order to produce a quality labour force, as labour has been established to be the most important factor of production (Guru, 2015). Human resources constitute the ultimate basis of production. Human beings are the active agents who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic, and political organisations, and ultimately effect national development. Fundamentally, a country which does not qualitatively develop the skills and knowledge of its people for effective use in the national economy will be unable to develop anything else. This paper therefore discusses and addresses the challenges Nigeria faces in qualitatively developing the skills and knowledge of its people for effective use in the national economy – i.e. the challenges she faces in providing quality education for her citizens.

Quality in Education: Looking at the Conceptual and Definitional Issues

The expression “Quality in Education” occurs in many scholarly works with a variety of such similar terms as “Quality of Education”, “Quality Education”, and “Educational Quality”. It is an elusive term, argues Sayed (1997) which, according to him, is frequently used but never defined. According to Sifuna and Sawamura (2010), the concept of quality in education is a contentious one. In the less industrialised countries of the world, there is little consensus on what it means and a universal valid way of measuring it (Lowe & Instance, 1989; Smith, 1997). Sayed further asserts that different meanings of quality in education by different scholars reflect different ideological, social and political values. According to Stephen (2003), it is dependent on the perspective of the person attempting the definition. The clear implication is then when we look at the term “Quality in Education”, we should refrain from doing so from a perspective coloured by the notion of a technical activity that is static and unaffected by contextual and contingent circumstances.

On their part, Hawes and Stephens (1990) posit that quality in education can be interpreted as having three strands:

- Efficiency in meeting set goals
- Relevance to human and environmental needs and conditions
- “Something more” in relation to the pursuit of excellence and human betterment.

“Efficiency” is interpreted as making the most of inputs, or the tools that are available, in order to reach and improve different kinds of standards, including standards of attainment in knowledge and learning skills; standards of creativity and critical thinking and standards of behaviour. “Relevance” includes relevance to context, relevance to the present and future needs of learners and relevance to humanity. The “something more” is explained as that extra quality of inventiveness, stimulation, excitement, concern for others or happiness which is found but found rarely, in schools and teachers (Hawes & Stephens, 1990).

However, this definition is essentially limited to the former and more focused context of the classroom. Classrooms are important avenues for change in behaviour, but very often what occurs there mirrors and reinforces external and social values. In the light of this, UNICEF (2000) takes a broader and holistic view of quality in education and concludes that the concept implies:

- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn,
- and supported in learning by their families and communities;
- Environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace;
- Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities;
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

Quality is therefore directly related to what occurs in two educational contexts: firstly in the more focused environment of the classroom and; secondly in the wider context of the school system and social system in which the classroom is embedded. Both environments have a reciprocal relationship with each other. Here, attention is shifted away from the classroom and directed towards the school system and the broadly social context of schooling. It then becomes clear that education addresses itself

to the vision of the society we desire to build. Nigeria as a country is interested in building:

- a free and democratic society;
- a just and egalitarian society;
- a great and dynamic economy; and
- a land full of bright opportunities for all opportunities (FGN, 2004).

Such a vision clearly addresses the question: “What is education for?” The bigger issues of the Nigerian society such as democracy, justice, freedom, and equality are embraced along with good classroom results and the personal and social development of children.

The definition of quality in education by UNICEF (2000) allows for an understanding of education as a complex system embedded in a political, cultural and economic context. This view is corroborated by the position taken by Sayed (1997) when he attacks the practice of looking at educational quality from a perspective that reduces education to a technical activity that is static and unaffected by contextual and contingent circumstances. This means that the learning outcomes that are required vary according to contextual circumstances. It can therefore be said that educational quality is a dynamic concept. It evolves with time and is subject to social, economic and political conditions.

According to Sifuna and Sawamura (2010) earlier referred to, regardless of the fact that the concept of quality education is still contentious, it is clear from a lot of research that good quality education facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that have intrinsic value and also helps address important human goals. Evidence is now clear-cut on the links between good education and a wide range of economic and social development benefits. Better school outcomes as reflected in student scores are related to higher income in later life and in an improved economic potential.

In the light of the foregoing and in the context of the society that Nigeria envisages, the writer attempts a definition of quality *in* education: The power of education to provide the citizens with the capabilities required for an economically productive and secured living, an enhanced individual, and to contribute to or to the building of a free, democratic, just, egalitarian society and a great and dynamic economy.

Quality in Education: Looking at the Contemporary Issues in Nigeria

An evaluation of the benefits accruing from education to Nigeria seen in the context of the society that she wants to build generates – or would doubtless generate – a damning report on educational quality in the country: Education has not anywhere fully delivered on its promise as the instrument par excellence for effecting national development. Merely filling a large number of spaces with learners in our schools, colleges, and universities – which is what the term “Quantity of Education” implies –

has not guaranteed for Nigerians a society firmly built on free, democratic, and egalitarian values. On the economic front, the benefits of education leave a lot to be desired. Nigeria is seventy (70) in the percentage of her citizens that live below the poverty line – 70% of Nigerians live on the infinitesimal amount of \$1 dollar per day (Ronen, 2014), which is even below the International Poverty Line of US\$1.90 updated by World Bank in October, 2015. Concurrently, income inequalities are also widening, with an estimated Gini ratio of 43.7%. Unemployment rate, in the first quarter of 2016, stood at 12.1% – up from 10.4 in the last quarter of the preceding year, and this is the highest since the last quarter of 2009 (“Nigeria Unemployment Rate,” n.d.). This pushes back against any unlikely claim of Nigeria as “a land of bright opportunities for all citizens.”

All this attests to a lack of – or a low-grade – quality in the Nigerian educational system. This is in view of the strong evidence existing to the effect that the cognitive skills of the citizens of a country, rather than mere school enrollment, are strongly related to individual earnings, to the distribution of income, and to economic growth (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007).

What then are the issues at play against high-grade quality in the Nigerian educational system? The question is addressed by the following:

Inadequate funding for education: Though adequate funding for education does not constitute an end in itself (Saavedra, 2002), inadequate funding for education is at the centre of all the odds stacked against quality in education in Nigeria. In order words, it arguably constitutes 70% of all that is wrong with quality in education in Nigeria. A good education financing system promotes an investment in efficiency and equity aimed at optimising the distribution of quality education among members of society (Saavedra, 2002), which is what Nigeria lacks but desperately needs. As earlier noted, money is not everything in terms of a device for getting all things right in relation to a good quality of education, however it occupies an integral space in a successful educational system.

Inadequate funding for education in Nigeria is a problem arising from the lean resources available to the Government – as the Government frequently claims – or from the lack of the political will to commit adequate resources to meet the citizen’s need for quality education. This has created the unfortunate situation of overcrowded classrooms, poorly paid teachers, poorly trained and – hence – poorly qualified teachers, and a lack of or insufficient supplies of teaching and learning materials.

Lack of adequate numbers of teachers and the problem of professionally unqualified teachers: A school is an important avenue for learning, and the No. 1 thing needed for quality instruction in schools is “the teacher”. Nigeria faces a huge problem when it comes to teachers. The challenges Nigeria faces in this regard do not stop at inadequate numbers of teachers but go beyond that to include the fact that most of the teachers lack professional training. Some are even below the minimum academic requirement for teaching, which is Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). It is not a

struggle – neither does one need to go far – to find a person employed to teach a subject for which he was not professionally trained.

Poor physical school environments: The physical environment of a school encompasses the school building and all its contents including physical structures, infrastructure, and furniture; the site on which the school is located; and the surrounding environment including the air, water, and materials with which children may come into contact (WHO UNICEF, n.d.). Scholarly works reveal that the quality of the physical environment significantly affects learning outcomes. There is sufficient research to state without equivocations that the buildings in which students spend a good deal of their time during school hours actually influence how well they learn (Earthman, 2004). According to the findings of one study, significant improvements in the learning environment are attributable not only to better attitudes to teaching and learning but also to improvements in the physical environment created for all user-students (Higgins, Hall, Wall, Woolne & McCaughey, 2005).

The quality of the physical environment of most Nigerian schools is grossly unfavourable to maximum academic output, as a visit to these schools would reveal. This arises from the fact that these schools lack the basic necessities for a healthy physical learning environment such as safe such sufficient water, clean and well-maintained sanitary facilities, and decent classrooms. There is also the prevalent problem of overcrowded classrooms, or classes that are falling apart, or those that are leaning outside. It cannot be stated enough that one who does not have a classroom or a decent classroom stands little or no chance of getting a decent education.

Poor social school environments: The social environment of a school is the quality of interpersonal relations between and among the head, teachers and students (Kennedy, 2015) – a quality that produces a feeling of togetherness, friendliness, and trust between and among the school head, teachers, and students.

A school with a healthy social environment is a good place: it is characterised by teacher relations that are professional, collegial, friendly and committed to the academic, moral and social development of students. The social environments of most schools in Nigeria are poor as a result of prevalent leadership behaviour. This then undermines the academic, moral and social development of students.

Lack of resources for instructional purposes: Instructional resources are essential to a successful classroom – i.e. a classroom that maximises learning outcomes for the learner. In terms of the availability and use of instructional materials in Nigeria, few schools – if at all – operate at the basic level of textbooks, chalkboards, and maps as well as non-durable supplies used by the teacher and the student such as notebooks, pencils and chalk. Looking beyond the usefulness of these basic instructional tools, there are audio visual facilities, scientific and technical and technical equipment, and computers – whose use for instructional purposes is out the question for many schools in Nigeria – which have become an integral part of educational practice. Where such resources are not in – or are in minimal – use, students do not receive the learning that

qualifies as a quality education. This is because the learning received is not characterised by such benefits that accrue from the use of those resources as the capacity to practise concepts and develop a product that demonstrates the learner's level of understanding.

Examination Malpractice: If you do a Google-search on the term "Examination Malpractice", you are most likely to find that 90% of the materials available on this concept are of Nigerian authorship. You are then likely to conclude, wrongly or rightly, that the term is a Nigerian invention and that examination malpractice is a problem somewhat exclusive to Nigeria. This illustrates how endemic examination malpractice has become to our educational system.

Willayat (2009) defines examination malpractice as a deliberate wrongdoing contrary to official examination rules carried out to place the candidate involved in a situation of unfair and undeserved advantage. Examination malpractice works against quality education in Nigeria in that most students no longer take their studies seriously as they hope to use it for an escape route out any likely examination difficulties. It has got to a point in Nigeria where there is now an active, collaborative involvement of students, teachers, and parents in acts that constitute examination malpractice. Quality cannot be achieved in the educational system of any country where acts contrary to official examination rules prevail, which is unfortunately the case with Nigeria.

The tendency for students to study to memorise rather than to study to understand: Most Nigerian students study to memorise at the expense of studying to understand. Meaningful learning cannot occur until the learner fully understands a concept and is able to apply that understanding to a new situation. Memorisation limits learning of ideas and concepts to word-for-word recall, and makes a student deficient in the ability to generate insight or creative ideas (Congos, n.d.). He (or she) is also not able to involve himself (or herself) in a deductive or an inductive reasoning. An education that limits the learner to word-for-word recall, an education that does not equip the learner with the capability to explain a concept to someone else other than through a word-for-word technique, and an education that does not equip a student to apply explanatory information received to a new situation, such an education cannot be called a quality education. This unfortunately happens to be the reality with most students in Nigeria.

Lack of professionally trained counsellors: Most schools in Nigeria – by not having professionally trained counsellors – underrate the importance of counselling services to the academic, social, and moral development of students. Some school administrators are of the mistaken notion that the counselling services that students receive from their matrons, wardens, teachers, and religious leaders are good enough to shape their behaviour and improve their academic performances. Little do they know that these classes of people lack the professional competence required for quality counselling (Kigongo, 2013). Effective counseling can only come from counsellors professionally

trained to demonstrate such qualities as empathy, a good sense of judgement, good listening skills, and the ability to follow up a counselled candidate.

Therefore, the absence of professionally trained counsellors in most of our schools means that the education students receive is deficient in quality to prepare them for the challenges of the 21st century through academic, career, and personal/social development.

Conclusion

It can be clearly noted, and therefore easily concluded, from the discussion so far that quality in – but not the *quantity* of – education is fundamental to endowing the citizens of a country with the capacity to achieve their personally set goals, while at the same time providing them with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes indispensably required for the political, economic, and social development of their society. Quality therefore is what we need for education to be able to fully deliver on its promise as the central driver of the economic, political, and social advancement of our country. Thus education cannot play a central role in the production of a quality labour force if it lacks quality.

In the context of our circumstances as Africans of Nigerian extraction – and also in line with the kind of society that we envisage as a country – an enduring presence of quality is needed in education as an instrument central to our capacity to build a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a great and dynamic economy; and a land full of bright opportunities for all opportunities.

For Nigeria to achieve the quality that her system of education unfortunately lacks but desperately needs, the country needs to demonstrate the will to address fundamental issues that relate to:

- Inadequate funding for education;
- Lack of adequate numbers of teachers and the problem of professionally deficient teachers;
- Poor physical school environments;
- Poor social school environments;
- Examination malpractice;
- The tendency for students to study to memorise rather than to study to understand; and
- Lack of professionally trained counsellors.

Suggested Strategies for Enhancing Quality in Education in Nigeria

1. The first step in the direction of enhancing quality in education in Nigeria is for the Government, not just at the Federal but also at the State level, to elevate education to the status of the No. 1 priority sector. The Government should then demonstrate the political will to appropriate the funds needed to adequately address the deficit of quality

human and material resources prevalent in the sector. Priority attention should be given to the recruitment of more teachers and for their regular payment of salaries. And supplies of materials for pedagogical use should always receive their deserved share in education financing.

2. Policy measures should be put in place, backed by any appropriated funds, to improve the physical environments of schools at all levels of education. An improved physical school environment should be related to the provision of decent and spacious classrooms with moderate temperatures and adequate lighting; clean and well-maintained sanitary facilities; and emergency medical care. Policy directives should also be implemented requiring private proprietors to improve the physical environment of their schools to a prescribed standard.

3 To improve the social environments of schools, the Government, through relevant educational agencies, should always organise workshops for principals for them to be trained in the art of relational leadership which, according to McCauly, Moxley, and Van Velsor (2001), involves the ability to empathise and be compassionate. The teacher-training curriculum should also be revised to incorporate interpersonal skills and relational leadership. The leadership of this nature will involve the creation of collaborative relationships in which consensus building, authorship and true caring are practised.

4 The Government and education policy-makers should come together for a brainstorming session directed at ridding our educational system of all forms examination malpractice. A suggested strategy would be for the Government to invest heavily in a technology designed to prevent malpractices in all examinations conducted by our schools and by all education agencies. Another important preoccupation of the brainstorming session should be with arresting the unfortunate practice by most teachers of teaching their students to memorise than to understand.

5 Lastly, the Government should come up with policy directives which would compel all schools to have ONLY professionally qualified teachers, including policy directives that make it obligatory for schools to have PROFESSIONALLY TRAINED COUNSELLORS in order to assist in enhancing the personal development of students in preparation for the challenges of life after school.

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