

BOOK REVIEW

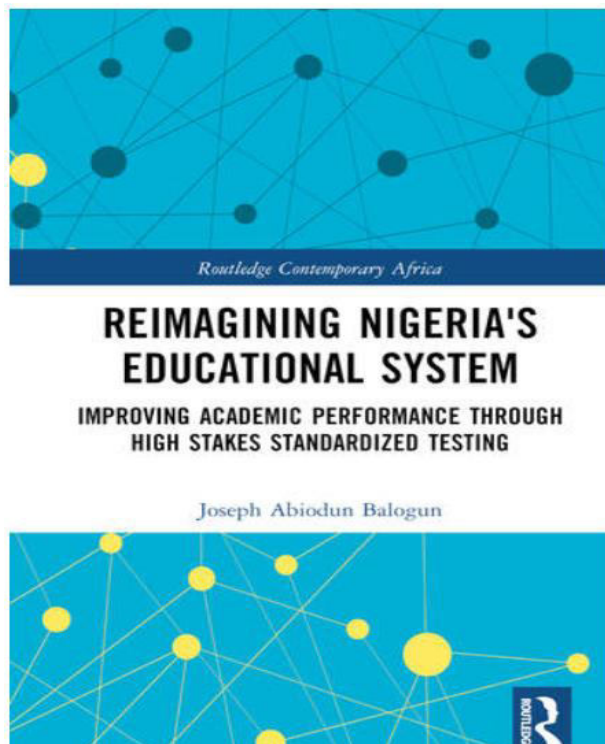
Reimagining Nigeria's educational system: Improving academic performance through high stakes standardized testing

DOI: 10.29063/ajrh2024/v28i6.13

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This 328-page book titled “**Reimagining Nigeria's Educational System: Improving Academic Performance Through High Stakes Standardized Testing**” discusses the beginnings of the Nigerian educational systems, its current challenges, and the possibility of improving its performance through high stakes standardized testing. The author, **Professor Joseph A. Balogun**, is a Nigerian-American academic, and a retired Professor of Physiotherapy at Chicago State University, USA. He previously lectured at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife-Ife, Southwest Nigeria and has had a distinguished academic career spanning over forty years. He introduces the book by reminiscing on the glorious education system of Nigeria in the 1970s

and 1980s. This is followed by the discussion of the current dismal state of the Nigerian educational systems where the best Nigerian Universities barely appear among the ten best universities in Africa.¹

In the first chapter of the book, he provides evidence of the deplorable state of Nigerian public educational system. While various governments have attempted to reverse this trend, the continued low ranking of Nigerian educational institutions compared to other countries remain worrisome. He posits that most Nigerian students who attend public schools learn in environments in “various stages of infrastructural decay and neglect, waste of resources, and decadent conditions of service”.

Nigeria has a long history of the use of high stakes standardized testing (HSST) to determine the progression of learners within the educational or professional pathway.² These include tests conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), and the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), that are required for study at the tertiary level in Nigeria. Some stakeholders have argued that the current state of the Nigerian educational system is worsened by using HSST, as they are riddled with low pass rates, inconsistent government policies, high testing fees, inefficiency, and high incidences of examination malpractices. Since HSST are major requirements for academic and profession progression, these imperfections can mar the outcome of such tests. It is within this context, that there have been arguments to scrap high stakes standardized testing. Balogun argues that Nigeria's poor quality education and low ranking is linked to several internal factors and not attributable to the negative effects of HSST, which is an essential tool to assess students' learning outcomes.^{1,2}

Chapter 2 examines the geography, political history, governance, and the geopolitical structure of Nigeria. It delves into the economy, religion, and transportation network of the country in an attempt to describe the main features of the country's socio-economic environment. This discussion leads to the security challenges that the country has faced over the last decades, which has included the destruction of some educational facilities, especially in the northern regions. This chapter concludes with a call to address the security challenges in efforts to achieve the country's full educational, economic, and technological potentials.

In Chapter 3, he provides a detailed description of Nigeria's educational system, and a history of western education in Nigeria at the primary, secondary, technical, and tertiary levels as well as health sciences education. This chapter is concluded with a relay of the intricacies of the hierarchy and structure of the Nigerian educational system.

Chapter 4 describes the role of Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Education (FME) and its different departments and parastatals in guiding the implementation of the national policy on education. While Nigeria boasts of a robust array of FME departments that cater for different facets of the educational system, Balogun posits that most of the decline in education lies in the implementation of the mandates of these departments. The various parastatals within the FME, including those involved in HSST such as WAEC, JAMB, and the National Examinations Council (NECO), were discussed in this chapter. An interesting aspect of this chapter is the documentation of the sociodemographic characteristics and the turnover rates of the leadership of the FME, which, the author opines, is responsible for "ineffective leadership, poor funding, lack of political will, unclear delineation of roles within the organizational structure, and inconsistent policy implementation".

The current state of Nigeria's education system is explored in Chapter 5. Balogun opines that a combination of neglect and mismanagement has led to the unwholesome state of Nigeria's educational system. In the author's opinion, this continued decline, as well as other factors, is currently posing a serious challenge to the availability of qualified teachers at all levels of education in the country. The author uses the literacy

rate, student enrolment, and school infrastructure as measures to support his argument on this decline. He then shifts his attention to the UNESCO recommended benchmark for funding of education i.e. 15 to 20% of the national budget;³ and the sad realization that successive Nigerian governments have never achieved this benchmark. The chapter concludes with an examination of the global ranking of Nigerian universities, which underscores the decline.

The fundamentals of standardized testing are examined in Chapter 6. It introduces HSST as a tool for assessing how soundly students learn and discusses the various advantages and disadvantages of this method of assessment. Thereafter, the author presents the global status and trends of the utilization of HSST. He lists the successes and challenges of countries like the USA, UK, and Japan to measure "consistent standards for all students regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status". The author concludes this chapter by highlighting the international HSSTs offered in Nigeria and the lopsidedness of its use by mostly children of the elite, and the prevalent cheating reported for nationally conducted HSSTs. He suggests that HSSTs remain valuable for assessing learning outcomes across schools but that they should include psychometrically sound assessments.

In Chapter 7, Balogun shares the lessons learned from six countries with high performing educational systems from across the world, including two from Africa. This comparison is based on parameters such as the percentage of out-of-school children, duration of compulsory education, literacy rates, government spending on education, student/teacher ratio, and gender parity index (GPI). The author remarks that while high performing countries in Africa face similar challenges as Nigeria, the difference lies in the willingness to learn and improve the system following international best practices. While none of these countries have a perfect educational system, evidence-based strategies, and the political will to improve the quality of education remains a mainstay for these countries.

In Chapter 8, Balogun presents evidence from the literature of the impact of COVID-19 on Nigeria's educational system at all levels, including professional education. Ultimately, the fact that education in Nigeria is largely centrally funded

makes it susceptible to economic fluctuations, expenditure management, and pandemics. The author concludes that there should be a conscious effort to invest in online learning platforms at all levels of education. Improvement of electricity supply and high-speed internet are also necessary to reduce the effects of pandemics and other forms of disruptions on traditional classroom teaching.

In the final Chapter of this book, the author summarizes the lessons from countries with high performing educational systems. This is followed by recommendations such as the institutionalization of high stakes standardized testing at all educational levels. The author suggests that such tests are particularly important at the kindergarten level to identify gifted children; a situation that is essentially absent in Nigeria. The author also recommends the participation of Nigeria in international high stakes standardized testing such as Programme International Student Assessment (PISA) tests for 15-year-olds to provide objective information on students at that level, and Professional Licensing Examination for entry-level to practice a profession.

While the author has presented many lessons learnt from countries with high performing education systems, it is pertinent to note that every nation should evolve its own education system in line with its specific context while maintaining global best practices. The Nigerian educational system has produced and is still producing highly successful academics and professionals. Evidence-based policy reforms, including strengthening existing HSSTs, may play a significant role in

redirecting Nigeria's education system towards high performance.

This book presents a detailed assessment of the Nigerian education system and how it currently compares with Africa, and indeed the rest of the world. It then suggests ways that high stakes standardized testing, especially at the kindergarten, secondary school, and profession levels, can be improved as objective tools for assessing individuals at these levels. It would have been interesting to include in this book a discussion of the reasons for the exceptional performance of many Nigerian students who currently attend public schools despite the challenges that exists. "**Reimagining Nigeria's Educational System: Improving Academic Performance Through High Stakes Standardized Testing**" is a good read for academics, education experts, policymakers, government officials, and indeed all stakeholders in the education sector.

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This book, *Reimagining Nigeria's Educational System: Improving Academic Performance Through High Stakes Standardized Testing*, is available, at the website's checkout:

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