



Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence in Delta State of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

We believe that the falling standard in education in Nigeria could be linked also to the lost glories of traditional education which inculcates among other things the very important values of hard-work, diligence, integrity, and high productivity. When these are lacking in any production system, education inclusive, the results are often devastating leading especially to poor quality output and wastage which in themselves undermine capacity building and sustainable development. The tertiary level produces the much desired human capital that propels nations from backwardness to modernization. But it has to be fed from the lower levels. A “mal-nourished” primary level would breed a “kwashiokored” secondary level that culminates into a “masrasmused” tertiary level. A survey of the opinions of 5,507 stakeholders was therefore carried out to determine whether educational standards were actually falling in Nigeria and at what level it was most grievous. It was found that standards have fallen at all levels of education, with the tertiary level being most hit, followed by secondary, and least, primary level. Three major reasons found were poor funding of education, poor implementation of educational policies and programmes and poor attitude to school-work. Recommendations included better funding of education adopting UNESCO’s 26 percent minimum of annual budget, inculcation of the tenets of traditional education, and utilization of research findings in managing Nigeria’s education.

Keywords: Quality education standards, 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 ‘seemingly’ falling standard of education in Nigeria. This perhaps

Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence

explains why government has moved from one education structure to another in search of excellence in its products. It would be recalled that Nigeria's education system has changed from the colonial 6-5-2-3 to the erstwhile 6-3-3-4 and now to the 9-3-4 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 ask for the old 6-5-2-3 structure run from the colonial days to the mid 70s which according to them produced the "well-baked" Nigerian scholars of yesteryears whose contribution to national development is seemingly being eroded instead of being built upon by education's products of today. Thus, there is a general hue and cry that the standard of education in Nigeria is falling at all levels and calling for remedies. People, scholars and researchers have observed 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 (Okebukola, 1998; Nwana, 2000; West African Examinations Council, 2002; Duze, 2002, 2005; Oderinde, 2003; Nduka, 2006; Nwangwu, 2007; Ogum, 2007). There are many of such poor students and graduates in Nigeria. The late grandmother of one of the authors of this study was a school teacher in the colonial days with only the primary six certificate and up till the time she died in 1992 at age ninety was much more articulate than many university graduates of today in Nigeria.

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 coupled with poor implementation, parents' nonchalance to children's school-work and activities, lack of interest and seriousness on the part of students which led to all forms of examination malpractice, the pursuance of the cankerworm of the "get-rich-quick" syndrome of the Nigerian youths of today, and the lost glories of traditional education which inculcates in individuals hard-work, diligence, integrity, and high productivity. Some other people have argued however, that even though educational standard may be falling anywhere, there is the need to note that decreasing percentage passes in final school examinations might be deceptive as number of passes in absolute terms could in fact be increasing. This notwithstanding, what we are talking about is the quality of such passes in being able to enhance the quality of education received and thereby add to capacity building and sustainable national development.

There is no doubt that in quantitative terms education in Nigeria has prospered with enrolments at all levels increasing in leaps and bounds. There are also expansions in the numbers and types of educational institutions in Nigeria. There is also this worry that the quality of education received by Nigerians in recent times is low and seems to remain a big problem to the education sector. The question in the minds of many Nigerians who believe that educational standard in Nigeria is falling is whether the falling standard in education is solely due to the educational structure or system that is operationalized since the government appears to concentrate in changing the system's structure instead of paying greater attention to strategies for

Chinelo Ogoamaka Duze

effective and efficient implementation of educational policies and programmes. It is therefore imperative to re-strategize concentrating on better funding of education; relevant curricula such as emphasis on science and technology education; ICT in education; school discipline; school ownership; teacher education; emphasis on the relationship between education and self-discipline, self-reliance, and self-fulfillment (which is what traditional education stands for); enforcing rules and regulations in the education system; tackling personality/family issues and the mentality of the society itself as relates to poor attitude to work, which could help solve the problems of poor quality education in Nigeria.

The main thrust of the much 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 (Duze, 1997; Leask and Pachler, 1999; Moswela, 2010). That is perhaps why 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 teachers' unions towards improving their conditions of service and their tools for service. At the time of this study, teachers in Nigeria had been on a long nation-wide strike demanding for their emoluments and rights while the government was not only idly watching but dishing out threats of sack to the striking teachers. Research has indicated the need to qualitatively improve the curricula, to provide high quality educational facilities, to increase the supply of qualified personnel and most importantly to encourage and motivate teachers if quality output must be obtained from the system (Arubayi, 1982; Duze, 1988; Aghenta, 1990; Nwadiani, 1998; Leask and Pachler 1999; Merruti et al., 2006; Ajayi, 2007; Moswela, 2010). Specifically, Leask and Pachler (1999: XV) declared that:

No matter how well schools are equipped with up-to-minute hardware and software, our teachers remain far and away the most precious element of our education system – no amount of technological wizardry can change the performance of our children without the enthusiastic support of skilled, professional teachers.

These research findings are believed to be well-available to policy makers in education but have not been truly and adequately adopted in solving education's problems in Nigeria (Duze, 2009). One begins to wonder whether Nigeria really wants quality education at home since the wealthy and privileged few obtain quality education abroad for themselves and their families and in most cases never return to Nigeria to add to national development. They remain abroad in greener pastures!

Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence

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. Thus the issue of quality educational products continues to elude Nigeria and it is worse so today. Evidences abound concerning the continued poor performance of students at all levels of education. Adesina (1977) found 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 50 percent in any Junior School Certificate (JSC) examinations. This was also the case for SSC examinations in all the subjects. Poor or low performance was also recorded at the secondary and tertiary levels in many studies (Ojerinde, 1974; Adesina, 1977; Duze, 1988; Salami, 1992; Ubokobong, 1993; Adeyemi, 1998; Bello, 2000; Adeyemo, 2001; Adebayo, 2002; Adeyegbe, 2002; West African Examinations Council, 2002; Asaolu, 2003; Oderinde, 2003; Oluwatoye, 2003; Onipede, 2003; Ogum, 2007).

It is known that Nigeria in recent years has not invested heavily in education despite massive expansions in this sector. It would be recalled that UNESCO recommended that countries should commit at least 26 percent of budgetary allocation to education. As noted in ASUU Bulletin (2002), the highest Nigeria has gone in recent years was 11.12 percent in 1999, with only 1.83 percent in 2003. Other years were 8.36, 7.0, 5.9, and 10.5 percent in 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2004 respectively. As reported by Akpochafo and Akpochafo (2005), Nigeria has never spent up to 15 percent of its annual budget on education since Independence in 1960. This portrays how committed the country is to education, yet she 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 manifest quality education, Nigeria tends to drag its feet, yet the goals of education as enshrined in our National Policy on Education, point to quality education. Besides, she was a giant participator in the famous Jomtien World Conference in March 1990, on "Education For All" (EFA) by the year 2000. EFA unequivocally emphasize education of good quality for life-long living. At the April 2000 EFA forum in Dakar, Nigeria together with other countries moved the EFA target year from 2000 to 2015. It is 2008, and Nigeria has nothing to show towards achieving EFA's lofty goals besides the change in the nomenclature and structure of the educational system. It changed from the Universal Primary Education (UPE) of the 6-3-3-4 system to the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of the new 9-3-4 system.

The UBE launched in Nigeria in 1999 is seen as one of Nigeria's response to EFA. But the then Minister for Education, Professor Fabian Nwosu, drove a 6-inch nail into that by declaring that EFA is unachievable by the year 2015. This is worrisome. We are therefore calling on the leaders

Chinelo Ogoamaka Duze

of Nigeria to come out and tell us in black and white why the “giant of Africa” cannot do in education what the “grasshoppers” in Africa (Gambia, Gabon, Ghana, Tanzania, Togo, Mauritius, Libya, etc.) are doing relatively well. That Nigeria is ranked 151st among 174 countries on the most recent HDR ranking implies a situation of absolute poverty, which Anya (2003) declared as dreary and un-cheering. Poverty is linked with underdevelopment. In Nigeria, 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. Udoidem (1992) listed the following as indices of development:

- 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 can therefore be argued 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.

Problem of the 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 seven indices of development noted above could reveal the state of affairs. It is in this light that this study sought the opinions/perceptions of all stakeholders in education on how well Nigeria is faring on national development vis-à-vis quality education. It is assumed that loss in capacity building and sustainable development implies loss in quality education which in turn implies falling standard in education. Three research objectives guided the thrust of this investigation.

Research Objectives

1. To determine empirically from all stakeholders in education whether the hue and cry about falling standards in Nigeria education is actually so at all levels of education.
2. To determine at what level of education this problem lies most.

Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence

3. To proffer immediate and long-term solutions in raising the standard of education in Nigeria and thus, enhance capacity building and sustainable development in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study is a simple survey which sought the opinions/perceptions of Nigerians on the issue of falling standard in education in Nigeria. The population was all stakeholders in education in Delta State of Nigeria. These include people from the public sector, the private sector, students, teachers, and parents. The sample was a total of 5,507 Nigerians drawn through the multi-stage and stratified random sampling techniques to reflect the above-mentioned stakeholders in education. The instrument was a structured interview in the form of a checklist constructed to capture the purpose of the investigation. The instrument was scrutinized by a jury of experts drawn from education and industry, and was found valid as it measured what it intended to measure. The instrument collected information on demographic data of respondents, opinions/perceptions on the standard of education in Nigeria at certain points since independence, and possible solutions to the problem of falling standards in education in Nigeria. Data were analyzed using frequency counts and the simple percentage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of data analysis were presented as they related to the research objectives, and discussions were taken along with findings revealed in the study and other studies.

Research Objective One

Research Objective One sought to determine whether standards were actually falling in education in Nigeria. Result of the analysis of the relevant data collected to investigate this objective was presented in Table 1. Results in Table 1 revealed that 80.01percent (4,406) of all respondents indicated that standards in Nigerian education have been falling at all levels since the 1980s; 2.98 percent (164) indicated standards have been falling since independence in 1960; 5.99 percent (330) indicated that there has never been any standard since colonial western education and as such no justified basis for falling standards; while 11.02 percent (607) said that standards have not fallen at all levels in education in Nigeria, but that the school system has become so complex and alienated from traditional education, that it has become difficult to manage.

Table 1: Responses on Actual Falling Standards in Nigeria Education.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Standards have been falling since independence in 1960	164	2.98
Standards in Nigerian education have been falling at all levels since the 1980s	4,406	80.01
There has never been any standard since colonial western education and as such no justified basis for falling standards	330	5.99
Standards have not fallen at all levels in education in Nigeria, but the school system has become so complex and alienated from traditional education that it has become difficult to manage	607	11.02
Total	5,507	100

We can agree from these revelations that about 83 percent of Nigerians believe that standards in education have fallen at all levels especially since the 1980s. This problem could be linked to the genesis of the adverse effects of the infamous “EXPO 1977” when there was a massive leakage of examination papers of the West African School Certificate Examinations. Since then, examination malpractices of different forms and ramifications have become rampant in Nigeria and have immensely reduced scholarship at both teaching and learning at especially the secondary and tertiary levels of education. This situation is further worsened by the prevalence of some other offending factors such as poor funding, inadequate infrastructures and facilities, irrelevant curricula, inadequate school inspection and instructional supervision, and poor implementation of educational policies and programmes as were identified by the respondents.

The other 17 percent, though not satisfied with the level of quality education in Nigeria have proffered reasons for the short-fall. The respondents that indicated the complexity and difficulty in managing the school system as hindrances to good standards indicated school population explosions at all levels, expansion without modernization in school types, as well as the relatively dwindling budgetary allocations, poor curricular dynamics to reflect the changing needs of the society, and poor teaching/learning facilities to ease academic stress. These reasons are worth a thought, and should be further verified to ascertain the extent they have gone in lowering standards at different levels in Nigeria education.

Research Objective Two

Analysis of data on research objective two presented in Table 2 revealed that the tertiary level suffers a loss in quality of education as recorded by 61 percent (3,359) of the respondents, the secondary level 32 percent (1,762), and the primary level 7 percent (386).

Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence

Table 2: Responses on the Level of Education Most Affected in Poor Standards.

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Tertiary	3,359	61
Secondary	1,762	32
Primary	386	7
Total	5,507	100

This means that the tertiary level is most hit in 'falling standards in Nigeria education'. This finding is worrisome since the secondary and primary levels put together (39%) account for less than 50 percent 'bad input' in terms of cognitive excellence carried into the tertiary level. If this is the case, then the tertiary level fed by the secondary level should have capitalized on the academic entering behaviour of the secondary school inputs and should therefore exhibit relatively higher academic standards. Nevertheless, an indicated fall in standard as high as 32 percent for secondary education is not encouraging. It introduces a tangible adverse effect at the tertiary level. There is therefore, a discrepancy here that must be further investigated since appreciably good input should produce appreciably good output, all things being equal. This therefore implies that all things are really not equal at the tertiary level. There are needs that must be met. This again is very worrisome since the tertiary level produces the enviable human capital necessary for national development. This finding has serious implications for higher education in Nigeria. This directly affects the high manpower production which operates the global highly sophisticated economic sector. If the economic sector in Nigeria retrogresses, then capacity building and sustainable development in Nigeria also fails. It could result into an unwholesome vicious cycle that could return the nation to the "Stone Age"!

Research Objective Three

The results of data analysis on possible remedies in presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Responses on Remedies for Poor Educational Standards in Nigeria.

Remedial Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Better funding of the education sector in Nigeria	5,507	100
Utilization of research findings in handling education problems in Nigeria	5,303	96.3
Adequate and effective motivation of teachers in the form of better emoluments and prompt payment of salaries	5,298	96.2
Periodic in-service training for teachers	5,270	95.7
Curriculum that is relevant to the needs of the society	5,259	95.5
Better maintenance culture of school plants and facilities	5,248	95.3
Re-orientation of students towards the value of the dignity of labour	5,127	93.1
Intensive involvement of parents in the activities of their children at school	5,111	92.8

Chinelo Ogoamaka Duze

From the responses on strategies for remedy, the most outstanding strategy was a better funding of the education sector in Nigeria (100%). Respondents agreed that Nigeria should seriously aim at implementing and sustaining the stipulated 26 percent minimum by UNESCO for African nations in the annual education budgets (ASUU, 2002). Other suggested solutions in the other of most needed include:

- utilization of research findings in handling education problems in Nigeria (96.3%);
- adequate and effective motivation for teachers in the form of better emoluments and prompt payment of salaries (96.2%);
- periodic in-service training for teachers (95.7%);
- a curriculum that is relevant to the needs of the society (95.5%);
- better maintenance culture of school plants and facilities (93.3%);
- re-orientation of students towards the value of the dignity of labour (93.1%); and
- intensive involvement of parents in the activities of their children at school (92.8%).

All these would help in providing an enabling environment for achievement of the goals of education. It is also disquieting to find that 100 percent of the respondents believe that Nigeria is retrogressing in terms of development and modernization. All their responses to the seven indices of development mentioned in this study pointed to the negative direction.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that standards in education are actually falling in Nigeria at all levels and because of this the products of our educational system are ill-equipped for effective contribution to national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made towards the attainment of quality education which would enhance capacity building and sustainable development in Nigeria:

- An awareness of the shortcomings of our educational system as well as a willingness on the part of everyone (government, private sector, teachers, students, parents, leaders, etc.) to evolve and sustain a more relevant system.

Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence

- A judicious adoption and implementation of research findings and observations that would enhance the quality of education at all levels in Nigeria.

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Chinelo Ogoamaka Duze

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Falling Standards of Education in Nigeria: An Empirical Evidence

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