

Educational Quality and Community Involvement in Nigeria: Some Implications for Educational Planning

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KEYWORDS Educational quality; school-community relations; local community involvement

ABSTRACT Many African countries, including Nigeria, have expanded their educational systems and, in addition, introduced Universal Primary Education. Given their limited financial and other resources, however, this easing of access to almost every level of the education system has led to perceptible drop in the quality of education offered in educational institutions. This paper addresses the issue of quality in education and outlines the obligations of the school to the local community. It then considers the importance of establishing effective links between the school and community, and the benefits to schools of involving the local communities in school affairs. The roles of some local communities in Nigeria towards enhancing the quality of secondary school education are highlighted. The challenges to teachers and educational administrators of involving community members in school affairs, as well as some implications of such involvement for educational planning are also stated.

INTRODUCTION

Many African nations have made giant strides in expanding their educational systems. Some of them have expanded their systems especially at the primary level in response to the 1961 Addis Ababa Conference that set for the continent the target of achieving free and compulsory universal primary education by the year 1980. Others apart from or in addition to this, see the achievement of universal primary education as a measure of international prestige and a symbol of emancipation. A good number of these nations have also expanded the facilities at the secondary and tertiary levels of education in the strong belief that such investments will yield high returns.

With the rapid increases in the number of schools at almost every level of the educational systems of the developing nations of the world, and given their limited financial and other resources, the concern of educationists, lay citizens and international bodies has been with the quality of education offered in these institutions. The issue of quality is not, however, peculiar to the educational systems of the developing world, for even some advanced countries have often expressed some concern about the quality of their own educational systems also. The focus of this chapter is on the roles some Nigerian communities have been playing in the development of their schools and

the various ways in which the community environment and its citizens can enhance educational quality if there can be effective interactions between them and the schools. It discusses the challenges to schools of increased school – community interaction and concludes with the implications of these for educational planning. Before these, a look at the concept of quality will be in order.

THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION

It is not easy to give a precise definition of quality in education. An attempt is made here not to offer a precise definition, but to merely indicate the sense in which the term “quality” is used in this paper.

Webster’s Seventh Collegiate Dictionary defines quality as “peculiar and essential character; an inherent feature; a degree of excellence; a distinguishing attribute”. The Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary and Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, among other meanings, define it as “grade of goodness, excellence” and “(degrees, especially high degree of) goodness or worth”. Implicit in these and the definitions in other common dictionaries are at least two notions. One of these is the idea of quality as being synonymous with the characteristics or property by which something is known

or can be described. The other idea, especially in education, is that of the value or worth of something. With regard to this common usage of the term in education, the participants in a symposium organised by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) still found it necessary to view the quality of an educational system from two different angles. One viewpoint is from the internal criteria of the system, such as a profile of student performance on a standard examination like the West African School Certificate Examination. The other is based on external criteria, such as its fitness and relevance to the needs of its environment (Coombs, 1968). In this chapter the writer holds a similar view that the quality of an educational system should be judged by both its ability to enable the students perform well in standard examinations and its relevance to the needs of the individual students, the community and the society as a whole. This quality can be increased or improved upon through the employment of highly qualified teachers, through building suitable school plants in suitable learning environments, through the development and exposure to pupils of relevant educational programmes, through prudent management of available educational resources, and as this paper contends, through effective interaction between the school and the local community.

THE SCHOOL, THE CHILD AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Goble and Porter (1977: 3) have identified three obligations of the school in the process of leading the growing individual into harmonious and fruitful social living. It has to be faithful to some concept of what a human individual is and might be so as to fulfill the potential of the person. One of the primary purposes of the school in any society is the intellectual development of the individual child to his greatest potential. This requires in addition to the mastery of the three Rs, the acquisition of factual information and understanding the concepts and meanings in a number of subject areas including the languages, the arts, history, geography, science and technology. In order to be useful, the school has to ensure that the skills developed in these subjects can be used in practical situations.

The second obligation of the school, according to Goble and Porter, is that it has to be

faithful to some model of what the society is or ought to be. This is necessitated by the fact that the school should always serve the interest of the society as a whole. To do this effectively, the school has to be aware of the cherished societal values and norms. It has to be aware also of the generally held idea of what a good or ideal society is and should be able to offer the child an opportunity to develop his potentials as a social being.

The third obligation of the school is to the local community in which it is located. This local community is the catchment area of the school or the area from which most of its students come. It may be a village or a group of two or more villages, a town, or a combination of the town and its surrounding villages. This local community, like the larger society in which it is located, has its own history, values, norms and traditions. It is the responsibility of the school to prepare the child for life in this community in particular and the society in general. For learning experiences to be meaningful to the child in especially the primary school and the lower forms of the secondary school, they have to be related to the child's immediate community and society. Even in the senior forms of the secondary school group and individual projects and studies in the various subject areas have enhanced meanings if they are based on the needs and problems of the school's local community.

The child can only be adequately prepared for life in his particular community and his society if the educational programme to which he is exposed is relevant to the problems, needs and aspirations of the community and society. It is in this respect that the inherited colonial system of education was found wanting and for which it was severely criticized by both the Nigerian nationalists and outside bodies. The Phelps-Stokes Commission noted with respect to the Nigerian educational system that the "present facilities for education... are... not adequately related to the hygienic, economic, and character needs... of the people" (Jones, 1922: 145). The educational system as a whole was patterned after that of Britain. The school was therefore alienated from the community it was supposed to be serving. Educational administrators were mainly concerned with maintaining a secure and peaceful environment in which pupils could do their work and teachers deliver their lessons with minimum interference from the outside world. The

child was required to do his work as quietly as possible and to comply with instructions from the teacher and other school authorities. Creativity, initiative and self-reliance seemed to be of no value.

Viewed from the internal criteria of the educational system, some of the schools could be adjudged to be of good quality so far as many of their students were able to reproduce whatever facts, bits of information or knowledge they were taught in class accurately enough to score high marks in external examinations. Based on external criteria, however, the school system was offering low quality education as most of its curricular offerings were not relevant to the needs of the community and the society. In order to be of good quality, the educational programme of the school has to meet the developmental needs, problems, aspirations and cultural life of the child's immediate community and the larger society. These can only be possible if the barriers between the school and its community are broken to make way for a constant flow of information and ideas between the two. Developing effective two-way communication between the school and the community will be to the mutual advantage of the two parties. It implies some specific roles for the school staff and community members. The various forms which this interaction can take, the possible benefits that can accrue to the child and school as well as the expected roles of the school staff and the community members in enhancing the quality of education are considered below.

SCHOOL - COMMUNITY INTERACTION

As has been pointed out, the school's local community may be a village, number of villages, a town and its adjoining villages in which the residents – parents and other citizens – have a common interest in the school. In the Nigerian situation, however, the local community of a school is often a rural or urban town. To focus attention on the local community of the school is not in any way to suggest that we should not take into consideration the interests of the larger community. Nor does it mean that the school should be concerned with only the immediate needs of its local community. While the school should be concerned with the long-term needs of its local community, care should be taken to ensure that they are in tune with the

developmental needs of the society as a whole.

There is an increasing pressure in recent times for strengthening the links between the schools and their local communities almost all over the country. The factors that give rise to this include the increasing enlightenment of parents, their concern for sound education of their children and their eagerness to see that whatever amount of money they spend on the education of their children is well accounted for.

The forging of effective links between the school and its local community is of utmost importance in all educational systems. Such links are normally forged through the involvement of parents in the life of the school and through the involvement of teachers with the families of their pupils. On many occasions, however, not only parents but other community members either as individuals or groups have one thing or another to do with the school while the teacher, in his/her efforts at doing his work effectively might find it necessary to get involved with some citizens who are not parents of his/her pupils and with some places and things in the community. Hoyle (1975) and other writers are of the view that the effectiveness of the school would be improved through greater cooperation with parents. According to Hoyle, research indicates that teachers see parental support as improving their effectiveness and satisfaction. A number of other benefits accrue to the school, the child and eventually the community as a whole.

Through effective interaction between the teacher and the families of his pupils, he knows each of them as an individual and may be in a good position to help those of them that may have some learning problems. Involvement of teachers with the members of the community affords them the opportunity to know more about the people and the life of the community, its history, culture, norms, values, problems and needs, its resources in the form of men, things and places, its folklore, the interest groups in the community and so forth. With the background knowledge of the community and its people, the teacher will be able to relate his lessons to the community environment of the school. The pupils will also be able to relate what they are being taught to their life experiences. Learning becomes more meaningful and interesting to them and the probability of their performing well in class work is high.

On some occasions the teacher may find it

necessary to bring in some community citizens who possess a better knowledge of the history, culture and other aspects of community life than him/herself to the educational situation either through their physical presence or, if the school has the means, through audio-visual means. On the other occasions the teacher may take his pupils to relevant places in the community for the study of some subjects like geography, history, religion and other subjects for which the community serves as a laboratory or for which it has the necessary resources for teaching and learning. Organising for this type of learning experience is justified only when the activities are related to some predetermined learning objectives and not simply as a way of varying the teacher's teaching method. Organising for this type of learning will be found very useful in the present 6-3-3-4 system of education in which a student in the junior secondary school is supposed to study some technical and pre-vocational subjects for which no workshops and qualified teachers are available at present in many schools. A good knowledge of the community will enable the school to identify good workshops in those communities where they exist and come to terms with their owners on how to utilise them for teaching and learning with such owners possibly serving as resource persons.

Through the involvement of parents in school affairs they will become acquainted with the problems of the school and may be able to render necessary assistance. Although the involvement of parents and other community citizens in school affairs may render the school open to criticism, such criticism becomes a welcome constructive force for the school.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Many communities in Nigeria have been playing very useful roles in their local schools. The involvement of parents in school matters in most of the communities is usually through the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). With a few exceptions, the traditional role of the PTAs has been the making of financial contributions to schools. These contributions, being discouraged by some state governments in the country for political reasons, are usually used for constructing some needed facilities and procuring some materials and equipment that may be lacking in the schools. In fact, some schools in one state

which the writer knows, still depend on the parents for money with which to purchase examination materials each term.

The involvement of the community in the life of their schools has recently gone beyond mere financial contributions by PTAs. Educational development in some parts of the country has witnessed increased involvement of the whole community. A study of the roles of four communities in Oyo and Ondo States in the development of schools in their areas by the writer and some of his undergraduate students revealed that each of them established at least one secondary school on its own initiative between 1976 and 1981. One of them, Illutitun town in Ondo State, built two secondary schools while the Modakeke community in Oyo State established one more secondary school during that period even though it already had three. Except for Efon-Alaye town in Ondo State where almost all the money was raised through voluntary donations, the method for raising money for school-building projects was by graded levies on every adult. In all the cases, money was also raised through donations by some town groups, clubs and associations. In addition to setting up classroom blocks, each town was constructing a laboratory between 1982 and 1984. In each of them, private individuals and groups voluntarily donated some school equipment and materials such as typewriters, duplicating machines, reams of paper and games equipment. In Illutitun town, the local branches of the Carpenters' and Bricklayers' Unions rendered their services free of charge. The willingness of the communities to play increasing roles in their schools is exemplified by the Ogboro Community in Oyo State which organised communal labour a number of times for maintaining the school lawns and grounds after the official opening of the school because they considered the students too young to clear the grass. According to the Financial Secretary of Education Committee of the town, the community regards the school as its burden.

The rapid increase in the number of secondary schools in the two states especially in the eighties may be largely attributed to community efforts. These communities were, however, not concerned with only quantitative development of the schools. Their concern for quality and contributing towards it found expression in a number of ways. Their attempts

at constructing laboratory blocks, purchasing or donating some equipment and materials for effective teaching and learning in the schools and providing the schools additional sums of money for running them even after they were officially opened were efforts geared towards this. It is not uncommon for these and other communities in the country, through the PTAs, to employ some qualified teachers and pay them to teach children those subjects for which they have no regular teachers. Nowadays some parents with requisite qualifications undertake to teach students, free of charge in their spare times, those subjects for which they have no regular teachers. Some parents and even whole communities have been known to make representations to the Local Inspector of Education, the School Board or Ministry of Education to cancel the transfer of some teachers who they feel are doing good work in their local schools. Some of them have been known to lobby for the posting of some good teachers to their schools. A good number of PTAs have financed the construction of additional classroom blocks in order to decongest some overcrowded classrooms. In these and other ways, local communities show interest in, and contribute to the qualitative development of the educational system.

THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Although more studies are needed, it would appear that parents, community, individuals and groups are willing to play more active roles in their schools. Traditionally, schools have isolated themselves from the communities which they served and teachers would prefer to do their work quietly in their schools with minimum interference from parents and other community members. Parents and other members of the community appear to be no longer satisfied with this state of affairs.

Increased parental and community involvement in school affairs is desirable in our quest for the qualitative development of our school system especially in these days of continued cutbacks in the votes for education. Equally desirable in this respect is increased interaction between teachers and parents and other members of their pupils' community. Our schools have a primary responsibility of helping each child to

fully develop his potentials. For this to be possible the teacher should have as much information about the child as possible through interacting with his parents and community. To prepare him adequately for effective participation in the life of his community and society, the educational programme which he follows at school should be relevant to the needs and aspirations of his community and the society as a whole. For the qualitative development of the educational system, schools need various inputs from their local communities. Learning resources abound in many Nigerian communities and are, in most cases, readily available to the schools that can identify and use them.

These and other considerations make it imperative that teachers should change their attitudes towards members of their school's local community, develop new viewpoints about education and new approaches to teaching. Teachers and school administrators have to admit that the education of the young is a joint responsibility in which parents and the entire community have some roles to play. It behooves them to know that however qualified a teacher may be, he does not have all the answers to the child's learning needs and problems. Educators often need to enlist the help of community members in the process of providing quality education for the child. The challenge to schools is to identify and locate the learning resources and resource people that exist in their school's community and utilise them effectively in the education of the young. They should shift from their roles as "monopolists of knowledge to that of the organisers and orchestrators of learning opportunities" (Goble and Porter, 1977:79). School people should find time to interact responsively and responsibly with members if they are to tap the resources of the community for effective performance of their jobs.

It is up to school people to open the school doors and keep them open to community members for meaningful dialogues between the two parties. It is through such dialogues that community members will know the problems and needs of the school and the appropriate roles they can play in solving such problems and in enhancing the education of their young. Teachers have to see parental and community involvement in school affairs not as threat but as one way of enhancing its quality. They have to see their own involvement with the community

and its members as part of their role towards improving educational quality and ensuring its relevance. New patterns of relationships have to be established with community members and effective ways of communicating with the different sub-groups and individuals in the community have to be developed. Appropriate roles have to be formally given to local communities in the management of their schools in order not only to sustain their active interests in the schools but also to channel their efforts towards the desired directions.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING

The point has been made that in order to do his work effectively in the school and in order to ensure the relevance of the educational programme, the school has to work in partnership with the members of the community. Teacher preparation programmes need, therefore, to be widened to include elements of social work in addition to the teaching of professional subjects. In-service training programmes for practising teachers also need to be organised with emphasis on methods of working with community members and organising for learning experiences in the community.

Instructional schedules need to be as flexible as possible to allow for the possibility of taking students to the community and spending more than the normal 30 or 40 minutes per lesson in the traditional schedule. Merely allowing for a double period for such lessons may not suffice. Planning the sort of required instructional schedule will be the joint effort of all the teachers responsible to each class for instruction.

In order to prevent any possible misplacement of emphasis by either the community members or school staff, planning for educational

provision has to be a cooperative effort involving various groups of people who are in one way or the other involved with the education of the child – teacher, parents, employers of labour, workers, religious groups and so forth. All these groups of people have to be involved in the determination of needs, formulation of policies, setting of objectives for the school, development of short and long-term financial and other resource plans for accomplishing the objectives, and evaluation of the plan.

In order to enable the communities members play more effective roles in improving the quality of education in our schools, legal provisions formally assigning some specific roles and recognizing some of the roles presently being played by some communities in the management of their local schools, will be in order. A situation whereby the community members will build a school, provide some of the equipment, provide some money for running it and play some other vital roles all of which remain unrecognized officially, calls for corrective action.

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