

THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AT THE FOUNDATION LEVEL OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

I join numerous well-wishers in congratulating GFR on its first-year anniversary. In one year, GFR has recorded achievements dwarfing other NGOs in its category that were established decades before. The glory goes to God and the honour to Her Excellency, Princess (Mrs.) Sarah Adebisi Sosan and all staff of GFR. We pray God to continue to strengthen you so that on your 10th anniversary, you will be listed among the top 10 NGOs that have impacted education the most in Africa.

The giant strides made by GFR are not unexpected. We cannot expect anything less from an NGO headed by Her Excellency, Princess (Mrs.) Sarah Adebisi Sosan, former Deputy Governor of Lagos State, a seasoned teacher and administrator whose mark on the education scene in Lagos State remains unbeaten.

I am appreciative of the thoughts that have gone into the topic assigned to me for this conference. This topic rests on the assumption that a solid foundation in education is a dependable framework on which other layers of education are built. Too often, attention of Nigerians turns to quality of products from our tertiary institutions, especially the universities. They forget that the student input into our universities is from the basic and senior secondary system. Poor quality products from the foundation level feed into the higher education system. This largely results in poor quality university graduates especially with the huge resource challenges facing our universities in processing such poor quality candidates.

The analogy of constructing a building is apt. without an eye on quality at the foundation level the superstructure will collapse. Hence if we fail to quality assure the foundation level of our educational system, we will reap poor quality university graduates. Perhaps this is why we are having a collapsing higher education

system. The purpose of this paper is to share my thoughts with you on how to quality assure the foundation level of the educational system. I shall begin with defining quality assurance and then proceed with a description of the state of the foundation level of the Nigerian education system, defined as Basic 1 to 9 in this paper. Because the label “primary education” is still prevalent, I shall interchange it with basic education, in this case, Basic 1 to 6. In the third and concluding part of the paper, I will make recommendations on how to better quality assure the foundation level to guarantee better delivery of education.

What is quality assurance?

Quality assurance, the central theme of this paper is a label for the process of ensuring fitness for purpose. As noted by Okebukola (2010), it emerged strongly in the education lexicon in the mid-1930s. In the last ten years, an upwelling of interest has grown around it at national and global levels, leading to the establishment of 23,000 agencies and networks which have quality assurance as core mandate. In Nigeria some national regulatory agencies are statutorily empowered to quality assure the primary education system. These are

1. National Primary Education Commission (NPEC)
2. State Universal Basic Education (SUBEB)
3. Local Government Education Authority (LGEA)

The laws setting up basic education superintended by these agencies accord them concurrent powers to ensure quality of process, products and services.

Brief Historical Review of Quality Assurance in Primary Education in Nigeria

The developmental history of quality assurance in primary education in Nigeria began in 1842 when the Wesleyan Methodist Society opened up a Christian mission station at Badagry in Lagos State. The Christian missionaries pioneered the provision of primary and indeed formal education in Nigeria. In fact, these missionaries built, equipped and managed schools and colleges single-handedly for over two decades (Ejiogu, 1986). The colonial government was definitely indifferent. Taiwo (1982) noted that during this period of Christian mission monopoly of educational organization and management, there was no distinction between a school teacher and a church catechist, for the teacher was basically an

evangelist more than anything else.

The government made its first formal entry into the educational sector in 1882 when it came up with an ordinance regulating education in the Gold Coast colony of which Lagos was part. This was followed by a number of other ordinances and education codes particularly those of 1887, 1903, 1916 and 1926. The 1926 education code created a register for teachers in Nigeria so that only those who were properly registered would be allowed to teach at all. The office of voluntary agency school inspectors was also to ensure that monitor quality by this code. It also awakened teachers to a realization that theirs was a secular job and not essentially religious and consequently to look up to the government for needed assistance rather than to heaven only (Ejiogu, 1886).

Primary education was popularized in 1948 when the United Nations General Assembly made a "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" which stated that "primary education shall be compulsory and free". Thus, universal primary education became a Nigerian phenomenon like the rest of the world. Shortly before independence, the western and eastern regions respectively embarked on programmes to make primary education free and by the 1970's, the wind of U.P.E. blew across the length and breadth of Nigerian (Fafunwa, 2003). The U.P.E. scheme in the west sky-rocketed pupil enrolment in the primary schools from 446,600 in 1954 to 811,432 in 1955, an increase of over 90 percent in one year.

By 1961, primary school enrolment in the west had risen appreciably. While the pursuit of quality was the goal of the scheme, the extent to which this goal was attained failed to fully meet expectations. The preponderance of untrained and uncommitted teachers, too large classes, unsatisfactory syllabus and inadequate supervision of schools constituted the bane in the system.

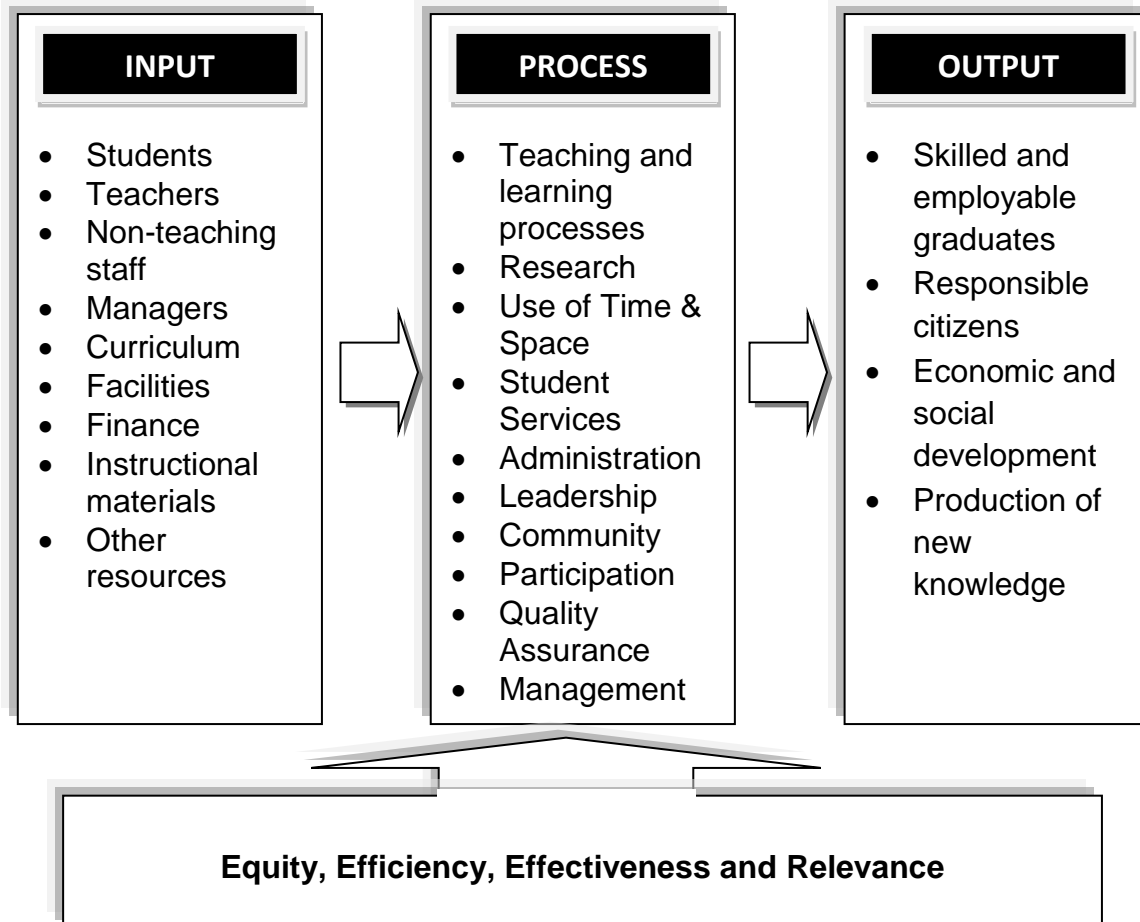
The Role of Quality Assurance in Primary Education

Quality assurance is an umbrella concept for a host of activities that are designed to improve the quality of the primary education system. It embraces all the functions of the school including such activities as teaching, caring, staffing, pupils, building, facilities and child development. Concern for quality assurance in primary education is most desirable for the fact that it serves as foundation for all other levels of education for if the foundation is destroyed what can the builders do? Ijaya (2010) opined that an educational system's worthiness lies in its

capability to continuously serve its customers, (pupils/students, parents, employers, the society) better and remain relevant. While quantity in primary education is concerned with getting as many children of school age to school in large number within the shortest time allowed, quality answers the question: What manner of education? How good or bad are the products?

The utility value of quality assurance can be seen through the provision of information to the public and other interested parties about the worth of the primary education delivery system. It equally ensures accountability in respect of the investment of public funds (Okebukola et al, 2007). Quality assurance is about ensuring that the school is performing the best that it can. It is not about compliance with regulations or counting textbooks but about the quality of the work of a school and its impact on pupils.

Okebukola (2010) proposed a system approach to quality assurance. This demands that dimensions of input, process and output should be the focus. The input segment includes pupils, teachers, curriculum and facilities. On the process side, emphasis is on teaching/learning interactions, internal efficiency, evaluation procedure and management practices. The output includes the quality of primary school leavers as well as the system's external efficiency.



Input Dimensions

Pupils: The period of childhood at which children begin formal schooling is seen as a period of quantitative deficiency, in which size, strength, stamina and sense gradually increase until physical characteristics of adulthood are achieved. With the declaration of Education for All (EFA) and the UN's Millennium Development Goals universal primary education is now a toast of most nations. Mass schooling has thus become a dominant means of intergenerational transmission of culture. Thus, the school in itself becomes a socializing agent to 'wipe out the evil inherent in children and to produce an orderly, civil, obedient population' able to carry out commands (Richards, 1995). How effectively the school does this is a function of quality assurance.

Teachers: Teacher education courses at primary level prepare teachers for the teaching of children aged 5/6 years to 12/13 years of age. Teacher education is central to both the UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) goals and the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The centrality of teacher education to such initiatives is obvious from the emphasis placed on the realization of completion of primary education by all pupils by 2015. Consequently, it is being conjectured that such goals as being targeted through the instrumentality of education are likely to culminate in major changes – both in principles and practice – in the landscape of education in the country. For instance, the National Teacher Education Policy (NTEP) in Nigeria (2009) stipulates as its Principle 8 that, "Teachers must constantly update their knowledge and skills if they are to remain relevant in a rapid changing world". This Principle has been interpreted in the Federal Ministry of Education Implementation Guidelines (2009:19) for the NTEP as implying among others "equipping the teacher to operate in a fast changing world in which knowledge has become the most valuable of all human possessions". This can only be achieved through the instrumentality of quality assurance.

Learning Environment and Facilities: Environment is an essential ingredient at the primary education level. Children at this level should be made to unfold their natural talents through an action from the external world. Therefore the environment must be conducive to learning and there must be provision of instructional resource materials which can provide experiences for all round development and to stimulate their physical, mental, emotional and social development.

Curriculum: This refers to all the learning experiences provided for learners under the auspices of the school. this involves consideration of

- the nature of knowledge
- the relative value of knowledge
- the relevance of knowledge

Deciding what should be included or excluded is not easy. in Nigeria, the task of deciding what the curriculum is, has been answered by the introduction of the basic education curriculum prepared by the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC). The task of primary school teachers in this analysis

is to ensure successful implementation of the curriculum. However, researchers have argued that the prescribed curriculum is an abdication of teachers and schools responsibility. if the curriculum is accepted unquestionably, is it possible for teachers to relate with it absolutely? Whether the curriculum is inclusive, contextually relevant and promotes equal opportunities for all pupils in Nigeria is also open to question.

Teaching and Learning: The quality of teaching plays a critical role in students' achievement effective teaching involves, at a minimum (a) presenting material in a rational and orderly fashion, pacing the class to the pupils' level and taking into account individual differences; (b) providing pupils with opportunities to practice and apply what they have learned; (c) letting pupils know what is expected of them; and (d) monitoring and evaluating pupils' performance in such a way that they can learn from their own mistakes.

Output Dimension

Emphasis is placed on measuring pupils' achievement and standards, how well learners make progress and the standards required by learners as well as personal development and well-being.

Our Score Card in Quality Assurance and Primary Education

Quality primary education involves three fronts: the learning environment, the preparation and motivation of teachers and management.

The Learning Environment

Research and observation have revealed that most schooling takes place under adverse conditions, in dilapidated school buildings with few educational resources, over-crowded classrooms, dearth of textbooks and other resources materials. This is particularly worrisome in public schools (Okebukola, 2012, Owolabi, Okebukola and Dansu, 2011). These studies provide evidence that Nigerian public school children neither receive high quality education nor have their levels of academic achievement reached parity with children from literate homes. The Nigerian public primary schools are just a caricature of schools when compared with the private schools. This accounts for the upsurge of private schools in every nook and crannies of Lagos State for instance. Parents seem to have lost confidence in the services offered so much that private schools have become the vogue; even sub-

standard ones thrives under the guise of providing quality education. The fees privilege and poor bemoan their lot and resign to the fate of sending their children to public schools (Ijaya, 1997 and Mehahunsi, 1997).

The Teacher: Preparation, Motivation and Methods

The process of teacher preparation requires adequate attention because a country's quality of education cannot rise above the quality of its teachers (FGN, 2004). The present forms and methods of preparing future teachers deserve a focus and view of continuous criticisms on the quality and quantity of teachers in Nigeria. Plethora of studies have criticized the present bunch of teachers for their shallow content knowledge (Okebukola, 1998), lack of pedagogical skills (Ajewole, 2005 and Odubunmi, 2001), poor attitude to work (Owolabi and Okebukola, 2009) and lack of commitment (Ofoegbu, 2005). Much teaching in Nigeria is characterized by teaching practices that are not conducive to pupils' learning, such as application of wrong methods, memorization of material rather than application of knowledge and little ongoing monitoring and assessment of pupils' learning through homework and classroom tests. For example, a study in Nigeria found that 78 percent of primary-science instruction was lecturing and less than 7 percent was student participation (Owolabi, Okebukola & Dansu, 2011).

Impediments to Quality Assurance in Nigerian Primary Education System

Depressed funding, capacity deficit in governance and management, political interference and corruption are some of the major impediments to quality assurance in the Nigerian primary education system. Poor funding explains infrastructural deficiencies and the engagement of head teachers in unwholesome income generating activities such as illegal levies and spending work time on other businesses. Strikes and closures necessitated by delayed and poor salaries are also connected directly or indirectly with poor funding. Political interference stands as obstacle to the quality assurance process in the appointment of weak but politically connected head teachers.

The over-crowded classrooms hardly provide opportunity for learning. Research has shown that teachers are frustrated by the large number of pupils in the classes, sometimes about 100-150 pupils are crowded in a classroom with only one teacher and even where there are two or more teachers the pervading noise renders the class uncontrollable (Onukaogu, 2001 and Okebukola, 2012).

The low socio-economic status of public school pupils' parents poses a huge challenge to quality assurance. Many of the children go to school on empty stomach and are ravaged by different kinds of diseases. Many of such pupils sleep during classes and absenteeism is common feature (Okebukola, 2012, Onukaogu, 2001 and Punch, 2011).

Children's capacity for learning is largely determined by their health and nutritional states. There is ample evidence that pre-school nutritional and stimulus deprivations are associated with deficits in cognitive development. Many children in the public schools are malnourished and have little exposure to learning materials before entering school (Okebukola, 2012).

In a survey of literacy practices, perceptions and teachers competencies, there were notable differences in the learning resources provided in the public schools. There was evidence that public primary schools lacked the required textbooks, libraries and other learning resources (Okebukola, 2012).

After highlighting the challenges to quality assurance in primary education, we turn next to the future of quality assurance in the system.

The Future of Quality Assurance in Nigerian Primary Education System

The ingredients for success for improved assurance are building up. The Federal Ministry of Education through its education roadmap to 2020 is repositioning quality assurance through the intervention of the Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPIN). This is a step in the right direction. Currently, those working in schools are reluctant to take responsibility for education quality because of the lack of resource and other challenges earlier highlighted. A more lasting goal as identified in the Federal Minister of Education's Roadmap is the establishment of the National Agency for Education Quality Assurance (NAEQA). ESSPIN will support the development of NAEQA as a means of coordinating and driving policy and processes of quality assurance at Federal and State levels (ESSPIN, 2012). This is supposed to subsume all the varied types of current inspection and inspectors towards the sole activity of quality assurance inspection linked to school self-evaluation. As noted in the ESSPIN position paper, school inspection in Nigeria has over time become increasingly ineffective and irrelevant to the process of improving education. The body is therefore poised to support the political and popular desire to offer Nigerian children a productive and useful

education. The focus is therefore to reform inspection to concentrate on quality other than just compliance to laws, rules and procedures. No doubt the proposal looks good on paper but whether or not these efforts will be well coordinated, implemented and sustained is a matter for debate judging by the way of earlier policies. We however look to the future with hope trusting in the legendary Nigerian survival spirit. The initiative and trust should be backed up with political will without which no laudable project will see the light of day in Nigeria.

It is conjectured that the challenge to quality will continue to be on the horizon in the coming years. The pressure of enrolment will increase with the Universal Basic Education policy and its attendant quality challenges. The following suggestions are made to ensure that quality assurance of primary education is sustained and improved upon.

Ensuring a Synergy of the Quality Assurance Agencies

The current quality assurance agencies for primary education function independently of others with no operational link. Therefore for the purpose of collaborative efforts, such bodies as Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), Teachers Registration Council (TRC), National Primary Education Commission (NEC) should partner with the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSPIN) to ensure proper alignment and focus to avoid duplication of duties and reduce wastage rate.

Improved Funding of the System

Human and financial resource strengthening of the regulatory agencies through the Education Trust Fund (ETF) monitoring the disbursement and use of such funds will foster functionality. Capacity building through local and overseas training of all professional staff of the agencies should be accorded priority attention.

Resuscitation of Primary/Basic School Leaving Certificate Examinations

Since one of the objectives of primary education is advancement to higher learning, the primary school leaving certificate examination should be resuscitated. The present practice of moving children from Basic nine to senior to senior secondary en mass without assessment leaves room for mediocrity. Secondary schools deserve the right to know the entry behaviour of their new intakes in order to plan appropriate instruction and follow-up on their performance.

Establishment of State Quality Assurance Agencies

State Governments should model the example of Lagos State in setting up agencies that will take responsibility for quality like School Improvement Scheme under the auspices of State Universal Basic Education (SUBEB).

Effective Use of ICT in Quality Assurance

The efficiency and impact of the quality assurance process will be significantly enhanced with increased use of Technology (Okebukola, 2012). Quality assurance practitioners will need to be continually updated about emerging technologies so that they can be deployed for data capture, processing and management of the quality assurance process.

Participation of Non-Governmental Organizations

The deep need for improved quality primary education in Nigeria and the substantial costs involved point to the need for the participation of non-governmental organizations like the GFR and Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) (Data on Primary School Funding). To effectively support primary education, donor agencies will need to provide broad support for specific needs, priorities and project investments. However, effective donor assistance will depend not only on the degree to which the aid is increased but also on the extent to which it is coordinated, monitored and used. For optimal efficiency, aid programmes must be mutually supportive and reinforcing and focused upon improving the policy and institutional framework for educational development.

International Partnerships

Partnership with international institutions and agencies with sound quality assurance can help in complementing the local efforts and in training practitioners. Financial aids can also be sought from developed countries in supplementing finances.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reviewed the role of quality assurance in primary education with special focus on Nigeria. Taking a cursory view of the history of primary education and quality assurance as perpetuated by the missionaries and colonial government, we noted the mismatch between quality assurance efforts and the

quality of the primary education system. The preponderance of challenges facing primary education from the pre and post-colonial era namely: over-crowded classrooms, shortage of teachers, teachers' incompetence, lack of suitable materials and poor learning environment persists. This calls for self-introspection and the invigoration of the quality assurance measures at the federal, state and local government levels. In this connection, recommendations were made for the synergy of quality assurance agencies, improved funding of the system resuscitation of primary/basic school leaving certificate, establishment of state quality assurance agencies, effectiveness of ICT, participation of non-governmental organizations and international partnerships.

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Brief Profile

Dr. Foluso Okebukola is an Associate Professor of Language Education. She had her secondary education at Baptist Girls High School, Osogbo and Christ's School, Ado-Ekiti.

She had her higher education at the University of Lagos where she obtained the Masters' and the Ph.D degrees in Language Education in 1999. She serves a number of organizations as consultant including UNICEF, UNESCO and Federal Ministry of Education. She is a member of Learned Societies including: World Council for Curriculum and Instruction, Reading Association of Nigeria, International Reading Association and United Kingdom Literacy Association.

Her research efforts have gravitated around five central themes: language policy issues, language curriculum planning and implementation, reading and content – area – instruction, metacognitive strategies in language education and socio-cultural influences on language learning.

These efforts have resulted in over forty nationally and internationally published works and many conference presentations.

She was Coordinator of the Diploma in Nursery and Primary Education programme at the Lagos State University. She is currently the Head of Department of Language, Arts and Social Science Education. Dr. Okebukola is happily married with children.