

Full Length Research Paper

Enhancing access to and quality of basic education through head teachers' leadership functions

Oni, J. O.¹, Jegede, A. A^{2*}, Osisami, R. A.², Illo, C. O.², Lawal, R. O.²,
Fabinu, F. A.³

¹Faculty of Education, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria.

²Department of Educational Foundations and Management, Michael Otedola College of Primary Education, Noforija Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria.

³School of Primary Education, Michael Otedola College of Primary Education, Noforija Epe, Lagos State, Nigeria.

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Basic education is the fundamental requirement for idiosyncratic and societal development. The individual child needs to have access to it and acquire it qualitatively. The sum total of all the knowledge attitude, skills and competences that the Nigerian child today acquires have been declared to be on the decline. Every stakeholder: teacher, pupil, community and government / proprietor have its own blame to share. Rather than bulk passing blame, it is necessary to seek for how to enhance access to and quality of basic education. This study explains what access and quality are. The leadership functions of the head teacher in enhancing access to and quality of basic education are also discussed.

Key words: Access, quality of basic education head teachers' leadership functions.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders of educational institutions have important functions to perform in the achievement and success of the entire education system. For success to be attained through having children who are able to read and write and later impact on the society they live, there must be access to quality of such education provision. An individual product of an education system has to initially possess the basis before ascending to the higher levels.

Having basic education is not just passing through the first nine (9) years of schooling but having happy children who possess the readiness to acquire the basis of

literacy, numeracy, life skills and learning how to learn. The National Policy on Education has provided conditions to encourage access to education. The success at the initial, primary level puts pressure on higher levels of learning. As it is being run, the number of primary schools available dictates need at the junior secondary level and so on. Therefore, it is not all the products of the lower level that are readily absorbed at the higher level.

For instance, in the 2013 Annual School Census Report, there were 1,555,925 pupils in the 1004 public primary schools of Lagos State, Nigeria. This was far

*Corresponding author. E-mail: ade_jegede@yahoo.com. Tel: +2347081544321; +2348058587600.

greater in number than 497, 984 students that were enrolled in 2013 into its 328 junior secondary schools (that is, basic 7 to 9 classes or grades). In other words, only 32% of pupils enrolled in public primary schools get enrolled in junior secondary schools that same year.

The quality of any educational system is mostly assessed by the performance of the system's products - such education system must be able to produce individual who is useful to himself, to his society and who will be prepared to meet up with global challenges. The fact is that a greater percentage of the products of basic education cannot stand on their own, and contribute to the achievement of the national goals and objectives. In other words, our schools appear ineffective, in that, low quality is achieved. This bothers on the leadership functions of school administrators to impart positively on people they work with so as to have successful pupils through giving quality education.

Therefore, attempts will be made in this study to explain what access and quality mean, and then discuss what it takes to have access to and quality of basic education. The leadership roles of the head teacher in enhancing access to and quality of basic education shall be discussed too.

What access to basic education mean

Access means availability or admittance. The Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary of Current English defined access as opportunity or right to use something or to see something (Hornby, 2005). Access to basic education can then be described as the opportunity or right that an individual child has to enroll or register for basic education class. The Blue-print on Basic Education stated in one of the objectives of UBE that government shall provide free, universal and basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age (FME, 1999).

Two researches were carried out by Nigerian Education Research and Development council, and were exposed by Maduwesi (2004), which undertook a situation analysis of access to learning and teaching at the primary school level. There was an increased enrollment among male and female pupils between 1997 and 2000. Based on access, the trend indicated an increased access to school for boys and girls; however it favoured boys in most States except Cross River and Enugu States, Nigeria.

People do not find it easy to change long held views, especially when they are based on deeply held beliefs and unexamined assumptions that "uneducated parents do not value education and that is why they do not send their children to schools. For examples, the head teachers needs to be exposed to different view points in that parents and community should no longer be told what to do. This is the taking and expecting approach to community interactions/relations.

Quality of basic education

Quality is the ability of something to perform or serve the purpose it is meant or designed to serve. It refers to being able to meet customers requirements, either in terms of products (pupils) or services rendered (Aina and Oyetakin, 2015). It is therefore a continuum of worth, ranging from the highest levels of excellence or superiority. Every institution is to ensure that a high quality of education is being offered.

Quality is characterized by fitness for purpose, fitness for purpose, value for money, perfection and excellence (Ekhuagere, 2005). Each institution should be able to embark on school self evaluation (SSE) by answering: where are we now? What is good now? And what needs improving?

Fitness of purpose

This is measured by the extent to which a school's provision aligns with, or fit national priorities, goals, objectives and aspirations.

Fitness for purpose

This is measured by the extent to which each institution's product fits its envisaged purpose.

Value for money

This is measured by achieving more with less in an efficient manner. That is transformation from one state to another with value added.

Perfection

This is perceived as the attainment of a near flawless product.

Excellence

This can be viewed as the attainment of exceptionally high standards (Okandeji, 2007). If all these have to be attained, the institutional head has to provide leadership in the right direction.

Leadership functions of the head teacher in enhancing access to basic education

The basic school head is expected to provide leadership

in enhancing access to basic education. Just as community needs the contribution of school head (and his team) in enhancing its development, the school head is equally duty bound to develop community-school relations for purpose of enhancing access to basic education. No wonder, Ekhuagere (2005) quoting R.S Peters declared that the school head as an educator has important social function in a community, however idiosyncratic his individual aims may be, he cannot be completely indifferent to the pressing needs of his community, especially if he is paid by the state. It is the pressing need of community to get its children educated, at least to have the basic. It is the head teacher that provides leadership in respect of this.

There is a need for the head teacher and the school to drift from the “taking” and expecting relationship with the community to a “sharing” equal relationship. This will enhance access and enrollment of community children in school. There is need for the community to be closely involved in school. There will be enhanced access and enrollment if people are willing to be involved in the school and be actively involved (Department for international Development/Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (DFID/ESSPIN, 2010).

The Lagos State Government (2013) recognized the involvement of the School Based Management Committee (SBMC) in helping to link the school with the community. The SBMCs are official bodies being established nationwide under government policy to strengthen the link between local communities and their schools and to check that schools are working. They are made up of voluntary representatives from across the local community who are committed to making sure schools make the best use of available resources so that children can learn well in a happy and safe environment. These are neither Parent forum (PF) nor Parent Teachers’ Association.

Improved access to basic education will take place with the head of the school supporting the School Based Management Committee (SBMC) in sharing the SSE with the community. The SSE had been done with openness and honesty, and the area of the school weaknesses are used to prepare school needs. These are later prioritized, the School Development Plan (SDP) prepared and implementation strategies developed. Monitoring of all these are embarked upon. The improved status of the school that is in a continuum aids enhanced access to education.

Heads’ leadership functions in enhancing quality of basic education

The issue of quality is uppermost in educational discourse all over the world. Quality is essential in maintaining a high standard of excellence. In spite of government effort at ensuring quality in Nigerian educational system, there

are allegations of low standard at all levels, the basic education level (primary and junior) inclusive (Ekweyugbe and Omoraka, 2005; Okandeji, 2007). Pupils are no longer willing to study; teaching-learning have become teacher-centred and poor quality has led to drop-out and low enrollment (Maduewesi, 2004). This, according to her led to many people, especially boys from the Eastern part of the country taking to trading rather than schooling, only to be unemployed at the end.

The Federal Government promulgated Decree No, 16 in 1985 on the minimum standard for primary and secondary schools nationwide. It was a deliberate effort at ensuring quality and it aims at:

1. Providing guidelines on general and specific principles of inspection and monitoring of schools;
2. Providing tools for evaluating the efficiency of school management;
3. Guiding proprietors in providing funds for the school.
4. Using the guides for accrediting the schools (Maduewesi, 2005).

Highly germane of the leadership functions of school heads is that of leading teaching and learning. This requires a deliberate and planned effort to carry out activities that improve the teaching /professional skills of the teacher so they can improve children’s learning. The head teacher can do this by, for instance, observing lessons and providing feedback. He can also arrange for others to do it. For example, organizing teachers with good skills to guide/mentor other teachers. There must be an organized and planned set of activities or process to improve teaching skills and children’s learning, and that is why it is ‘leading’.

Good/quality lesson plans can also be used as models for other teachers. It can be used as a resource in workshop on writing lesson plan or they can be used in conjunction with lesson observations, reviewing them as part of the feedback process.

Apart from that, the head teacher can organize monthly meeting for teachers’ professional development. The resource person can be the head teacher himself or school service/supervisory staff from the Local Government Education Authority (LGEA). He can also organize demonstration lessons of good teaching skills. All the activities by the head teacher in leading teaching and learning are intended to improve pupils’ learning and achievement.

The head teacher’s leadership and management, especially in the area of delegation of responsibilities will enable him to be focused. He identified those role/responsibilities to be delegated and those that should not. For those that are delegated, he establishes boundaries which make role holder to be aware of those functions he/she can perform independently of the head teacher, and distinguish them from those he would have

to consult the headteacher before embarking on them. In other words, there should be clear roles/responsibilities. Doing this allow teachers and other staff to perform duties that each has the natural propensity or endowment to perform. A kind of high standard is attained and this is quality.

It is the responsibility of the head teacher to provide leadership in ensuring regularity and punctuality of children's attendance in school. This will eventually curb truancy and lateness. If children enjoy coming to school, the happiness makes them learn better. Irregular attendances are also followed-up. The absentee register will guide the welfare officer so appointed by headteacher in doing proper follow-up. Irregular attendance makes it hard for pupils to build on previous learning. The SBMC also has role to play in discussing with the headteacher and the classteacher of pupils that are absent or attend school irregularly. They will look for patterns such as days or classes or gender (boys or girls) of pupils having poor attendance. Older pupils are also made to mentor younger ones. All those will assist in enhancing quality education. It is worthy of note to state the three perspectives of quality of education as follows:

1. Quality of education refers to the extent to which the educational system meets or tends to respond to the economic needs of the society.
2. It refers to the effectiveness with which the educational system promotes or reinforces among children and young people, the culture and values, morals and attitudes particular to a given society.
3. It refers to pupil performance or standard of attainment in different schools or subjects. The complaint about decline in the quality of education means that standards of attainment have fallen or that the average level of achievement at different level as established through examination results or test scores or other forms of scholastic achievement, has gone down steadily.

The school improvement programme (SIP) currently going on in Lagos State and some other five states of the federation (Nigeria) has shown improvement in the way teachers teach, and consequently increasing the quality learning acquired by pupils. The reason being that, teaching-learning is becoming more activity based and head teachers are progressively providing leadership in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Enhancing access to and quality of basic education requires the leadership functions of the school head. He develops community-school interactions/relations,

ensures accountability and manages the school resources (both human and material). This reposes confidence and eventually children are given access to education that they enjoy having, for happy children learn better. Quality education is very vital in every human existence and societal development. It enhances the rate of development and increases the standard of living whoever acquires quality basic education, receives the pivot for further development both of himself and his society. The impact of the intervention by the Department for International Development/Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (DFID/ESSPIN) can be best showcased at the end of the on-going composite survey by Oxford Policy Management (an independent body).

Conflict of interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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