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## **LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL: CHALLENGES TO EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS**

**Dr. (Mrs.) A.T. Alabi<sup>2</sup> Dr. (Mrs.) R. O. Oduwaiye & <sup>3</sup>Dr. Y. A. Fasasi**

### **Abstract**

*This paper examined the learning environment in Nigeria primary schools, and the challenges it posed to educational administrators. Learning environment refers to the totality of internal and external influences surrounding a school. For the achievement of basic education objective, a positive learning environment is important where the physical, emotional, social and academic developing are adequately taken care of. Among the challenges of primary school learning environment to school administrators are inadequacies of qualitative human and material resources as well as appropriate and inappropriate facilities. Although evaluation criteria in the schools are uniform, conditions under which each school operates is not uniform in terms of available resources. In recognition of the need for an environment that would be conducive for effective learning, it is recommended that, in consult all stakeholders in education, a positive learning environment policy be formulated in the school. There is also the need for improved provision, utilization and maintenance of school plant, with pupils encouraged and trained to take responsibility for facilities maintenance. Moreover, there is need to arrange physical facilities in the classrooms to allow a learner-centre approach to teaching.*

*Keywords: learning Environment, Nigerian Primary Schools, Challenges, Educational Administration*

### **Introduction**

The totality of internal and external influences surrounding a school constitutes its environment. The appropriateness of such a learning environment is vital both to safety and to effective learning and development (DFES, 2006). Learning environment involves both the people and the space in which school children learn and develop.

For effective learning to take place, the environment needs to be conducive, allowing

pupils, space and time to interact within the learning and teaching process. According to Highland Schools (2000), creating and maintaining stimulating learning environments can be achieved through adequate provision of relevant resources, effective classroom organization, interactive and whole school displays and a climate of innovation.

Basic education forms the foundation of the Nigerian 9-3-4 education system. It covers three years of junior secondary school education and has laudable objectives such as inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, citizenship education as well as the forming the basis for further educational advancement. It therefore becomes important that the learning environment in these schools is positive and stimulating. The resultant safe and peaceful atmosphere would help school, staff, pupils and parents feel accepted and respected and learning would be the focus.

The components of a positive learning environment include physical, emotional, cultural/social and academic environments. An appropriate physical environment is one in which pupils feel safe, cared for and relaxed, with the support of adequate and relevant infrastructures such as buildings, seats, playing ground and necessary equipment. Emotional environment refers to an *enabling* environment where pupils are in the continuous care of responsible and knowledgeable adult (teachers, parents, etc) who the pupils trust and who are responsive to their needs and interests.

Cultural/social environment signifies a conducive atmosphere where pupils have the opportunities to learn cultural and socially acceptable behaviors as well as friends, and develop relationship. Academic environment encompasses all resources - physical, human, material, programmes and opportunities for pupils to use the resources creatively and develop their potentials.

Hingerd on the importance of a conducive learning environment to the achievement of the basic schools objectives, this paper examines vis-à-vis the objective of basic education in Nigeria. The effort of government in conducive learning environment in school are equally highlighted. Such innovation programmes include the all encompassing state education sector project (SESP) which include the School Development Scheme (SDC) where School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) is constituted to incorporate parents and community members as part of the school management.

## **Concept of Learning Environment**

Learning environment refers to the context in which learning takes place. It is the surrounding circumstance, which affects learning. An environment in which learning occurs can be as wide as a particular society and it may be an education institution. According to Nwadiani (2000), a learning environment is the condition and influence that a learner encounters, resulting in a series of complex interactions and ensuring a permanent change in behaviour. This definition implies that an individual's acquisition of skills, knowledge and competencies, would occur under certain conditions and influences. In the education system, there are physical, social economic and cultural conditions that influence an individual. These conditions encompass both internal and external factors that affect the quality, quantity and type of knowledge an individual learner acquires.

In the view of Obanya (2007), education does not occur in a vacuum. It grows in a socio-political-economic environment and there can be no education without a society. Thus, a society provides a macro environment in which a school exists as a micro – environment that influences the operation and the extent of achievement of educational objectives. Therefore, the development of an individual, through knowledge and skill acquisition in schools, could be influenced positively or negatively by the socio-political and economic conditions of the environment. This is probably the reason why Akubue (1991) stated that:

A good learning environment has the advantage of fostering desirable behaviour and attitude, developing problem-solving skills and creative thought; encouraging students' interrelationships and fostering learner-centred methods (p.10).

"

A school is a formal organization where teachers and learners' activities are planned, organized and controlled both internally and externally. It is a formal learning environment which is influenced internally and from outside physically, academically, socially and culturally. According to Akere, Esan, Obashoro and Osondu (1998), the school as a learning environment comprises physical, academic, social and cultural environments.

The physical environment is made up of school location, physical feature and structures within and outside the school. For example, a school may be located in urban or rural areas, noisy or quiet area. Building, equipment infrastructures available within a school and its

surroundings also constitute its physical environment.

Academic curricular and consist of curricula and co-curricular activities in which teachers and learners engage in classroom, libraries, laboratories and other places in the school. Social environment is created through interaction among classrooms and other places in the school. The cultural environment consists of rules, regulation, value and discipline. It also includes all school activities meant to learners into societal culture. These give the school its own tradition.

Dominant among these features is the physical environment. It reflects the political social, economic and intellectual capacities of the environment both internally capacities of Olagboye (2004) referred to them as physical resources, school plant school facilities. The physical learning environment is vital to the achievement of education objectives. However, as observed by Nwadiani (2000), many classrooms are dilapidated, overcrowded, incomplete without doors, window shutters, window shutters, chairs and tables for teachers and students. This situation is as true as in the year 2000.

Culture refers to the norms, value, expectations action and emotionas responses of a people Children are not born with a culture, but they learn it in a group (Phelon, Davidson & Cao, 1991).

According to Dhindsa and Salleh (2009), a successful learning of culture in a society is influenced by many factors such as rural and urban background, financial status of family, language, ethnicity, gender, occupation and so on, thus giving rise to subculture culture. Pupils from these subcultures may have beliefs that conflict with the teaching and learning strategies in the classrooms. The onus is thus on the teachers to use the varied pupils cultural beliefs to make instructions more meaningful and to prevent conflicts with pupils' cultural learning environment (Thaman, 1993).

### Objectives of Primary Education

The five main national goals of Nigeria, which have been endorsed as the necessary foundation for the National policy on Education, are, according to FRN (2004)

- a) a free and democratic society;
- b) a just and egalitarian society;
- c) a great and dynamic economy;
- d) a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens.

It is from these national goals that Nigerian philosophy on education is formulated. Subsequently, the national education goal, among others, is, "the acquisition of appropriate skills and the development of mental, physical and social abilities and competencies as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the society" (p.5).

Based on the development of mental, physical and social abilities and acquisition of skills, the Nigerian educational system has been divided into pre-primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Each educational level seeks to develop an individual. Primary education according to FRN (2004), is the education given in institutions for children aged 6 to 11 years. It is the foundation on which education is built and it is for a period of 6 years.

The objectives/goals of primary education are to:

- a) inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively,
- b) lay a sound basis for scientific and effective thinking;
- c) give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribute to the life of the society;
- d) mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;
- e) develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
- f) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity;
- g) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement. including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

The section on primary education in FRN (2004) stated further that. "Government shall therefore provide basic infrastructure and training for the realization of this goal". Section 19(1) stated that government welcomes the contributions of voluntary, agencies, communities and private individuals in the establishment and management of primary schools. This is in recognition of the fact that education is a big venture which requires cooperation of all stakeholders.

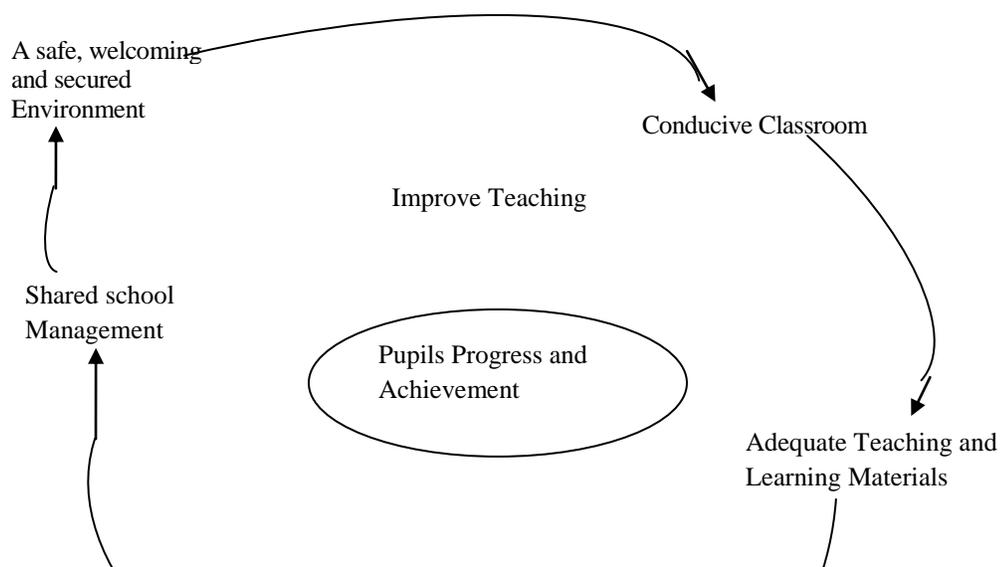
### **Government Efforts towards Improvement of Learning Environment**

The physical learning environment, that is the infrastructure, catches the attention of the government more than any other aspects of learning environment. The infrastructure of

primary schools had been for some years preceding Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Nigeria, neglected. Roofs of many schools had fallen off. Many of the buildings were dilapidated. There were not enough seats for the pupils to sit. The sites of many primary schools, prior 1999, were appalling and not inviting.

After UBE was launched in 1999, primary schools began to wear new looks. There was deliberate effort towards improvement of the physical environment. Many schools were built, a large number were repaired and in FGN (2006) booklet of UBE Commission, the criteria for utilization of UBE intervention fund stipulates that infrastructural development takes 70% of the fund. This includes classroom construction, classroom furniture, classroom renovation/rehabilitation, laboratory/workshop equipment, introductory technology equipment, borehole construction and provision of toilets, while textbooks and working materials attract only 15%.

After the national initiative of the Federal Government towards the improvement of learning environment through UBE, Kano, Kaduna and Kwara State Governments in 2007 initiated 'State Education Sector Project' (SESP), which was sponsored by World Bank through the Department for International Development (DFID). This school development scheme is in line with the commitment of the Governments of these three States to improve the quality of education. Specifically, it is an effort to make schools better places for children to learn (FGN. 2007). In this scheme, "schools are encouraged to focus on improving the learning outcomes of their pupils and to develop a comprehensive plan which explicitly links all proposed activities to the improvement of teaching and learning and pupil welfare" (p.5). The overview of School Development Plan is depicted in this model:



### **A model for school development planning**

*Source: FRN (2007) School Development Scheme Manual*

In this School Development Scheme (SDS) model, improvement in learning is captured in the highlighted five major areas:

- 1) A safe, welcoming and secure environment
- 2) Conducive classroom
- 3) Shared school management
- 4) Effective teachers
- 5) Adequate teaching and learning materials.

Kano, Kaduna and Kwara State trained School Based Management Committee (SBMC) members and disbursed funds for the improvement of learning environment in primary schools. The second session took off in September 2009 and the scheme impacted positively on primary school pupils in these States.

### **Stakeholders' Responsibilities in Learning Environment**

Stakeholders in the education sector refer to the community, the parents and teachers. Before the government take-over of schools in 1971, the communities, the religious bodies and

individuals who established schools provided enabling environment for learning to take place. When government took over all the schools, it was a huge venture that was too heavy for the government to carry and the unmaintained infrastructure began to dilapidate. Recently, the government through the education reforms of 1999 began to call on the stakeholders to share the responsibility with the government. Adopt-A-Public-School initiative aims to leverage stakeholders in education, particularly corporate organizations, to come together as partners, for the purpose of rescuing our public schools and consequently restoring them to institutions capable of delivering sound learning.

It was the save-our-soul (SOS) call that brought back the communities, religious organizations, Parents-Teachers Associations and individuals to save the ailing educational situation. Specifically, the Blueprint and unite paper on UBE recognize the roles and responsibilities of parents and communities ;-executing specific projects and provide logistic support (Oduwaiye,2002), while parents should mobilize infrastructural and material resource> a? well as encourage and support increased enrolment. In the School Development Scheme (SDS), parents and local communities art strengthened and empowered in school -\_-ea management committee (SBMC). The S5MT members take part in the administration of the schools and they jointly execute projects that improve school learning environment.

Apart from Parent/Teachers Association (PTA), religious organizations, and non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have the advantage of reaching the grassroots and have in recent times become a profitable complement to the provision of education delivery especially in areas of teaching and learning materials (Oluchukwu, 1998). Private sector organizations like public limited liability companies such as Chevron/NNPC and Shell petroleum companies, all commit tremendous resources to education. The Education Tax Fund (ETF), through the enabling Act 7 of 1993, is required to remit 2% of its profit to Education Tax Fund. The funds are used for rehabilitation, restoration and consolidation of education in Nigeria. All Federal, State and Local Government institutions benefit from this tax. The Federal Government stipulates that primary education should take 49% of the fund, followed by universities with 25%. Others are polytechnics 12.5%, colleges of education 12.5% while secondary education has 10% (45<sup>th</sup> NCE 1998). All these are steps towards creating conducive and welcoming environment for learners.

## **Challenges Facing Educational Administrators**

Many primary schools in urban and rural centres are constrained by their learning environments from achieving up to expected standards. These schools are faced with inadequacy of qualitative human and material resources.

For instance, inputs such as teachers, pupils and administrative staff are sent into the schools from the society. The quality and quantity of personnel given to schools and the level of commitment injected into them in terms of motivation would influence the extent of performance and consequently the extent of learning achievement.

The personnel are to make use of the physical facilities. These are also inadequate, irrelevant or not available at all in many schools. On the distribution of these facilities into schools, neither the principle of equality nor that of equity is observed due to environmental factors.

In addition, the school personnel are operating within a socio-cultural political environment. Positively or negatively, the environment regulates the extent to which they could perform. In fact, resources, which are provided for the education system, are, largely, beyond the power of the administrators. Yet, the administrators are responsible for planning and other managerial functions and they are accountable to the government and the society.

A standard has been set in the education system for the learning activities and there is uniformity in evaluation criteria stated by the examination bodies. However, the conditions under which each school operates are not uniform. Thus, at evaluation stage, hardly is consideration given to resources available in the environment and the manner in which they are utilized.

In the Federal Government's assessment of the implementation of universal basic education in Nigeria in 2006, it was found that 54.12% of primary school teachers were NCE holders, 33.73% had university degree certificates while 12.15% had certificates below NCE (Table 1). The minimum qualification for primary school teachers in Nigeria is NCE (FRN 2004). Teachers who have qualifications that are lower than NCE may exhibit inadequacies in curriculum implementation. In addition, teachers with higher qualifications may constitute administrative problems to school heads who are holders of NCE certificates. These categories of teachers are not likely to promote a conducive learning environment in primary schools.

Table 1: Highest Educational Qualifications of Primary School Teachers

S/N Qualifications	Frequency	%
1. Masters or Ph D degrees	8	1.57
2. Graduate with teaching qualifications	158	30.98
3. Graduate without teaching	6	1.18
4. NCE	276	54.12
5. Grade 1	2	0.39
6. Associateship Certificate/Diploma	19	3.37
7. TC11 Pass/TCAll (pivotal)	34	6.67
8. TCI 1 referred	2	0.39
9. HISC/HMSC	3	0.58
10. Secondary school	2	0.39
Total	510	100.00

Source: Universal Basic Education Commission (2009). *Final report: 2006 national assessment of universal basic education programme*. Abuja: Universal Basic Education Commission. P. 78

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Primary education is the bedrock of the entire Nigerian education system. The achievement of the laudable primary education objectives is hinged on effective teaching and learning that can only take place in an enabling positive learning environment. The current situation of inadequacy in physical, human and material resources in our primary schools poses serious challenges to school administrators. Based on these challenges, the following recommendations are made to improve the primary school learning environment.

As a step towards taking care of all the environments - physical, emotional, academic, social and cultural - there is the need to formulate a positive learning environment policy in the primary schools. This should be done in consultation with the all education stakeholders. A process should be established on providing relevant and adequate resources, identifying best practices for standard emotional environment, and supporting all partners in the school system carry out their expected roles and responsibilities.

Provision, utilization and maintenance of school plants are important to creating a conducive physical environment for learning. pupils should be encouraged and trained to take responsibility for facilities maintenance in the school. In addition to provision of adequate classrooms, benches and tables, opportunities should be created to arrange the seats for group/team work. This arrangement would allow learner-centred approach to teaching as against the current teacher-centered approach due to overcrowding and or

inadequate space.

More support is needed from government, teachers, parents, students and other stakeholders in education towards improved implementation of the different innovative schemes/projects in the schools. These schemes are expected to improve the quality of education through improved school facilities and teaching force, strengthened school relationships and pupil welfare, better school management, all culminating in improved teaching and learning.

There is an increasing need for teachers to be sensitive to the important cultural environment (milieu) in which their teaching is taking place so as to blend the teaching with the pupils' previous learning pattern, home environment, morals and values. Good teacher communication behaviour could help to improve the cultural learning environment in the classroom situation.

Creating conducive social, cultural and emotional environment depends, largely, on the teachers and school administrators. There is therefore the need to address the training and retraining of teachers to create a conducive socio-cultural and emotional environment where pupils feel comfortable to learn meaningfully.

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