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EVALUATING EDUCATION REFORMS IN NIGERIA: GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND EQUITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLING

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Abstract

The goals of education reforms should be expansion of access, enhanced learning and promotion of inclusive and equitable educational privileges. Nevertheless, neither the presence of reform policies nor the incessant changes made to them translate into enhanced outcomes automatically, particularly for underprivileged learners in public schools. This paper studies education reforms in Nigeria through the interrelated lenses of governance, accountability and equity. It adopts a qualitative review approach, drawing on relevant policy documents, empirical studies, institutional reports and scholarly literature, with a focus on basic public schooling in Nigeria. The review revealed that Nigeria had a series of significant education reforms in the past targeted at broadening involvement, enhancing relevance and consolidating basic education. Yet, persistent challenges such as poor implementation, inadequate harmonisation, weak governance and inadequate monitoring continue to hinder the realization of reform intentions. Research outcomes from the National Assessment of Learning Achievement in Basic Education (NALABE) 2022 show significant knowledge gaps and variances across grade levels and school contexts. They also reveal differences between public and private schools. The review also shows that if functionality is strengthened, clear responsibilities are assigned, reliable information is accessible, and institutions are empowered, accountability mechanisms involving government agencies, schools, teachers, communities and school-based structures can actually be effective and support improvement in learning outcomes. This paper contends that educational equity involves more than equal provision; it entails governance measures that recognise disadvantaged learners and schools, direct appropriate resources towards them and hold responsible stakeholders liable for execution and consequences. It concludes that sustainable education reform in Nigeria requires stability of education policy, genuine implementation, careful monitoring through functional stakeholders and commitment to achieving true accountability and equity.

Keywords: Education reform, governance, accountability, equity, public schooling, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Education is central to all-round development of individuals and Nigeria as a nation. Beyond transmission of knowledge and skills, it is expected to promote social mobility, citizenship, self-reliance and national development. In pursuit of these, successive Nigerian governments have put in place policies and structural reforms anticipated to increase access, enhance quality and make education more sensitive to nationwide needs. To date, learning difficulties and inequalities persist from one end to the other. This is an indication that frequent changes in education policy or formal school structure, curriculum, education budget, governance design and provision do not translate to the success of an education reform.

The continuing gap between policy intention and educational experience at school level has been worrisome in Nigerian education. Some factors have been observed to be vital to the success of educational policies. As stated by Viennet and Pont (2017), intelligibility and significance of policy objectives are not enough to guarantee its effectiveness but the capability of institutions to implement it, the accessibility and equitable distribution of resources, the aptitude of personnel, the quality of administration and the extent to which different stakeholders accept and diligently perform their responsibilities. If uncontrolled lapses occur at any of these levels, it may spell doom for the whole structure.

The study carried out in 2022 by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) in collaboration with UNICEF corroborates this. It was tagged the 'National Assessment of Learning Achievement in Basic Education (NALABE)' and assessed the context under which learning takes place in the Nigerian Basic Education system in order to identify factors that improve learning achievements with a view to enabling evidence-based policy and decision-making. This study provided a robust measurement of pupils' learning performance in mathematics, English studies, basic science and technology, and social studies among Primary 3, Primary 5 and Junior Secondary 2 learners across all 36 states in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. Contextual information was elicited from the sampled learners, their parents, teachers and school principals to assess conditions in which learning occurs. The results are weighty for any argument on education reform. Across the assessed subjects and grade levels, only 14% to 50% of learners attained or exceeded the required minimum proficiency. In mathematics, for instance, 50% of Primary 3 learners attained at least minimum proficiency, compared with 34% in Primary 5 and only 14% in Junior Secondary 2. In English studies, the equivalent figures were 32%, 44% and 31% respectively. The report also found variances by school type, with private-school learners largely performing better than their public-school counterparts (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC] & United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2025).

In addition, NALABE studied school resources, teacher characteristics, professional development, school leadership and community involvement. The assessment found that teachers in higher-performing schools were more likely to be motivated by professional development activities, while higher-performing junior secondary schools were more likely to have professionally qualified teachers with substantive experience. Also observed were differences in teaching practices in the classrooms, resources available, community support accessed and pupil-parent engagement (UBEC & UNICEF, 2025). The implications of these findings go beyond assessing learning attainment. The study established that outstanding learning outcomes are linked with a blend of institutional, instructional and contextual settings rather than any single factor.

This evidence poses a central question about how education reforms should be appraised. Significant aspects of educational effectiveness may be lost if reforms are mediated primarily by whether a policy has been formulated, a programme launched or an institutional structure formed. The submission is that reform should be evaluated beginning from what happens during implementation, assessing who is responsible for what task, what information is obtainable to monitor improvement, and whether the benefits of reform reach learners equitably.

At this juncture, governance and accountability become imperative. Educational governance depicts the structures, relationships and processes involved in decision-making, responsibilities shared, policies implemented, and monitoring of education providers (World Bank, 2008). Accountability, on the other hand, comprises the processes through which stakeholders' sense of commitment is evaluated in terms of decisions made, extent of performance and responses to allotted tasks (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2017). Therefore, in education, accountability should be a shared responsibility of governments, schools, teachers, parents, learners and other stakeholders. In the same way, if effectiveness in public services is to reach the masses and the underprivileged populations, there should be a strong commitment among policymakers, service providers and citizens.

The equity aspect is similarly important. Equality entails ensuring provision of the same resources or opportunities to all learners, while equity takes into cognisance that learners and schools do not share the same environmental features and social background and may hence need different attention and kinds of support. Thus, equity in education refers to giving fair attention to the needs of different learners according to their circumstances such that no child is deprived of educational opportunities, resources and support as a result of poverty, location, disability, insecurity, gender, or any other situations that may hinder learners from achieving their educational potential (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2018). The challenge of low equity in education is not peculiar to Nigeria. Many other countries are also striving to reduce the percentage of disadvantaged children. This means that the education system should provide equal learning opportunities to all students in order to allow similar levels of academic performance in key cognitive domains, social and emotional well-being. This does not imply achieving the same learning outcomes but that the differences in learning outcomes will not be as a result of their background, economic status or social circumstances (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018).

Nigeria is one of the countries that are still striving to resolve the core challenges of governance, accountability and equity in education. The history of education reforms from inception vividly shows the efforts to attain more functional and responsive education for national growth. The 6-3-3-4 system that replaced the colonial era education system raises hope of literacy plus skill acquisition. Then, the Universal Basic Education programme was launched to complement it such that every citizen will have access to basic education. Thereafter, provision was made for early childhood education by adding an extra year to give us 1-6-3-3-4. The current reforms in the system emphasized improvement in quality, skill acquisition, inclusive education, data and quality assurance in the education sector. All these are well stated and designed but there are continuous implementation problems.

Bolaji et al. (2016) found that both the design and objectives of the Universal Basic Education programme are good for the citizen, but the handling of it administratively was weak and flawed. This study reveals that formal content of a policy does not single-handedly connote a positive policy outcome but collective, thoughtful arrangements among individuals responsible for implementation. Similarly, Nchare (2021) studied School-Based Management Committees in Nigeria and found that the efficiency of school-based structures varied according to local and institutional settings and determined the educational improvement gained from the stakeholders' involvement. Thus, the study warned that it should not be expected that mere organisation of a participatory structure in the school will inevitably produce improved outcomes.

Gershberg and Rai (2015) in their conference paper offered a wider perception through investigation into accountability in multifaceted education reforms in Nigeria and other countries. The conference paper acknowledged and emphasised that education reform encompasses multiple institutional levels and cannot simply be condensed to a sole accountability mechanism. The primary objective of the study was to identify suitable ideas for the Nigerian government. This is quite pertinent to Nigeria, where responsibilities for education are disseminated across federal, state, local and school-level institutions. The paper developed and applied a theoretical framework for understanding and evaluating accountability in multifaceted institutional reforms. The framework is potentially useful for policy experts to plan how accountability could be maintained, monitored and sustained.

The fundamental concern of this paper, therefore, is not to assess the number of education reforms Nigeria has launched or to estimate the causal effects of governance mechanisms on learning outcomes statistically. Rather, it addresses four related concerns. First, it surveys the development of key education structural reforms in Nigeria. Second, it appraises related empirical and policy literature on implementation and accountability. Third, it studies certain governance and accountability mechanisms within Nigerian public schooling. Finally, it discusses the consequences of these mechanisms for educational equity and suggests practical tips for strengthening reform implementation

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concepts of Education Reform, Governance, Accountability and Equity.

Education Reform:

Education reform is conceived as a thoughtful and collective effort to bring about noteworthy changes in an education system, concerning changes in structures, policies, practices and relationships envisioned to advance educational outcomes (Fullan, 2007). As expressed, reform is far more than the introduction of new policies or the amendment of current regulations. It comprises a continuous process of transforming policy intents into changes in how educational institutions are ruled, how funds and tasks are distributed, how stakeholders are held responsible, and how learners benefit from educational services. This wider understanding is vital in investigating education reforms through the eye lenses of governance and equity. A reform may be determined in its objectives and well-designed in policy, yet its benefits may remain vague when implementation is incapacitated by weak institutional administration, insufficient resources, partial management or vain accountability mechanisms. Thus, the focus of an education reform should be the effectiveness of its implementation and how the resulting changes will fairly enhance educational opportunities across clusters and contexts but not what the policy proposes to change.

Governance in Education.

Largely, governance implies the structures, organisations and processes through which authority is exercised, decisions are made and public policies are formulated and executed. Drawing from the Worldwide Governance Indicators framework, Kaufmann and Kraay (2024) conceptualised governance in terms of the quality of organisations through which authority is exercised, including government efficiency, governing quality, rule of law and accountability. In education, governance connotes the capacities, guiding policies, rules and procedures through which education systems are controlled, managed

and held accountable (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024). Governance in education has an extension beyond the formal government structure in that it includes the relationships among the stakeholders, responsibilities shared, and patterns of decision-making through which different stakeholders are guided and committed to the delivery of the services.

Having a good understanding of the concept of governance in education is very germane to education reform because implementation of reforms should follow the current governance arrangements. In other words, the interpretation of policies, their financing, coordination, monitoring, and translation to practice are influenced by the quality of governance arrangements. If responsibilities are clearly spelt out and institutions own the capacity to organise and render an account of their actions, it is more likely that reform implementation will run smoothly. Conversely, the gap between policy intents and educational realities will broaden with weak institutional capacity, poor management and insufficient accountability. Suffice to say, therefore, that governance is an appropriate lens for investigating whether reforms are introduced, how well they are implemented, and ascertaining whose educational interests they eventually serve.

Concept of Accountability

Accountability in a simple form is being answerable to one's conduct. Thus, in a relationship where an individual or group is assigned a duty or an institution saddled with responsibility, it is expected that at the required time, such individual/group or institution will be called to give reports and justify how the duty has been carried out. In education, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report explains accountability as a process through which individuals and institutions are assisted to carry out their responsibilities and realize their goals, with the expectation that those stakeholders will deliver an account of how the responsibilities assigned to them have been fulfilled (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2017).

However, accountability should not be simply equated with punishment or imposition of sanctions. The World Bank (2004) conceptualises accountability as a relationship involving designation, funding, performance, evidence of performance and enforcement. This standpoint is very important because no individual, group or institution can be practically held accountable for an outcome if the responsibility given was not clearly spelt out, adequate resources not provided, required information not disseminated and needed access was not granted. Therefore, in public education, accountability comprises relations among policymakers, education providers and citizens or beneficiaries. This is quite relevant in the context of African education systems.

The importance of clearly defined responsibilities, governance structures, information, monitoring and mechanisms for improving the quality and efficiency of education delivery was highlighted in the World Bank's study of governance, management and accountability in secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2008). It clarifies that accountability is not a separate administrative mechanism but a solid part of the broader governance measures through which education systems are meant to be managed and reforms are executed. In this manner, accountability links policy intentions with implementation by making the activities and the performance of relevant stakeholders more evident and exposed to enquiry. It makes it possible to answer fundamental questions about 'who is responsible for what, to whom, on what basis, and with what consequences' when responsibilities are not positively carried out.

Educational equity

Equity in education is essentially concerned with fair-mindedness. UNESCO (2017) defines equity as guaranteeing that there is passion for fairness, such that the education of all learners is viewed as being of equal importance. The UNESCO guide further ties equity with eliminating hindrances to learners' access, involvement and achievement and with ascertaining that every child benefits from the education system irrespective of their differences (UNESCO, 2017). A complementary perspective differentiates equity from equality of outcomes. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that an equitable education system gives equal opportunities for learning, while differences in educational outcomes should not result from differences in students' socio-economic status, gender, family background or other conditions beyond their control (OECD, 2018). Equity does not imply that every learner must achieve exactly the same learning outcome; but that learners' personal or social circumstances should not be a setback, and a fair opportunity should be offered to develop their potential regardless of the challenges they have.

This paper emphasised the distinction between equality and equity in education. Giving learners or institutions the same treatment or materials does not necessarily yield equitable outcomes. This is because learners and societies enter education systems with different conditions, levels of disadvantage and support needs. Therefore, an equitable reform ought to require education authorities to identify challenges of different groups and areas and provide differentiated support so that the known disadvantaged groups are adequately taken care of. UNESCO's framework equally emphasises attention to

inequalities in educational access, participation, completion, learning processes and outcomes (UNESCO, 2017). Equity is basically important in evaluating education reform. A reform may be considered inequitable even if it shares all resources equally and applies the same policy to all, but because it fails to recognise differences in situations and addresses barriers that may stop some groups from benefiting equally from the reform. This makes equity closely associated with governance and accountability. Governance entails regulation of how decisions, resources and responsibilities are ordered; accountability provides mechanisms for monitoring whether these responsibilities are well carried out; and equity provides a basis for enquiring whether the resulting policies and practices serve learners fairly. Thus, equity in this study is regarded not merely as equal handling, but as fairness in educational opportunity, participation and benefit, to ensure that disadvantaged groups are not systematically excluded from the benefits of reform (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2018).

2.2. Development of Main Education Structural Reforms in Nigeria

Nigeria's education history demonstrates a frequent attempt to make education more relevant to national needs. However, the concern of this paper is not a display of the sequence of structures but to review what each reform attempted to achieve and what implementation experience reveals about governance, accountability and equity.

The 6-5-4 system

The 6-5-4 structure of the education system was inherited from the colonial master at independence. It consists of six years of primary education, five years of secondary education and four years of university education, with additional arrangements such as the Higher School Certificate for some learners. The structure was largely theoretical in orientation and was not designed to give a comprehensive universal education for Nigerian citizens. More so, educational provision was unequally shared. Fafunwa (1974) got on record the historical development of education in Nigeria and the gradual demands for a system more reactive to native social and national needs.

The 6-3-3-4 system

In quest for a more functional education system, Nigeria held the 1969 National Curriculum Conference. Part of the strong recommendations of the conference was the development of the National Policy on Education, first published in 1977. Historical documentation has it that the 6-3-3-4 structure of the education system was an offshoot of the 1969 conference and the 1977 National Policy on Education. The system has six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, three years of senior secondary education and four years of tertiary education.

The structure was proposed to make education more functional and to introduce practical and vocational skills, principally at the junior secondary level. The programme was launched and took off in all schools. Practical and vocational components require workshops, equipment, trained teachers and adequate supervision. A huge challenge was visible in most parts of the country. For instance, in schools where workshops were built, there was no equipment. Those who had workshops and a few pieces of equipment found that there was no electricity to power the engine. Only a few schools across the nation had a successful run of the programme. This was captured as a partial implementation in a study carried out on the evaluation of the 6-3-3-4 system. Rather than having more practical lessons, the programme was more theoretical in schools where the apparatuses were not present and where the tools were not in use for one constraint or the other (Anyadike, 2004). This study did not fault the structure but the challenges of implementation. Similarly, Oyelere (2015) compared people who went through the 6-3-3-4 system with those who experienced the earlier 6-5-4 system using a regression-discontinuity design. The study found some evidence of lower poverty likelihood and higher wages among selected participants. However, consistent evidence of improved employment was not found. Notably, the study submits that the reform cannot be regarded as wholly unproductive.

Universal Basic Education programme (UBE)

The Universal Basic Education programme was launched in 1999 and received statutory support through the Compulsory, Free Universal Basic Education Act of 2004. The Act established the institutional and financing framework for compulsory and free basic education and provided for the Universal Basic Education Commission, State Universal Basic Education Boards and Local Government Education Authorities (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

The UBE agenda reinforced the national obligation to basic education and promoted nine years of continuous basic schooling comprising primary and junior secondary education. UBEC explains that the UBE programme was intended to reinforce the 6-3-3-4 National Policy on Education and emphasises the nine-year basic education cycle for every Nigerian child. Although the programme has a statutory framework, its implementation faced constraints. Bolaji et al. (2016) studied UBE implementation among education bureaucrats in two geopolitical zones and the Federal Capital Territory. The study

found weakness in the administration of the system, which led to constraints in implementation. Education needs effective coordination as well as clearly spelt out responsibilities, suitable resources, plausible information and active monitoring.

The 1-6-3-3-4 adopted system and current policy developments

The sixth edition of the National Policy on Education (2013) recognised the 1-6-3-3-4 structure, merging it with the existing 6-3-3-4 structure by adding one year of pre-primary education to the existing six years of primary, three years of junior secondary and three years of senior secondary education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). One year of pre-primary education before the six years of primary education was added in recognition of early childhood education and foundational development. The question is, how many public primary schools are equipped to accommodate this pre-school arrangement? The issue is not a debate on whether the structure is educationally desirable. But the core challenge is the preparedness of the government to fund the existing schools to accommodate this, adequate funds to run smoothly, stakeholders to saddle with the responsibility and how to make the stakeholders answerable.

The emphasis of recent policy developments has been on education improvement. The Nigeria Education Sector Renewal Initiative (NESRI), the Federal Ministry of Education's current six-point reform agenda, is advocating for technical and vocational education and training, STEMM, out-of-school children, girl-child education, data and digitalisation, and education quality assurance. The focus of the data and digitalisation pillar is to emphasise the development of education data systems and evidence-informed decision-making, while the quality assurance pillar focuses on teacher development, learning environments, curriculum reform, school safety and examination systems (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.). A notable development is that current reforms appreciate the interconnection of quality, access, skills, inclusion, information and accountability. These priorities are germane but a huge challenge is still the problem of inconsistent implementation and partial accountability.

The history of structural reforms reflects genuine gains in many facets, institutional development and curriculum reforms. Therefore, no literature validates the claim that every previous reform failed, but the focus should not be on structural change alone. Across different reform periods, causes of implementation failure include insufficient funds, inadequate infrastructure, low teacher capacity, weak coordination, ineffective supervision and continuity. The submission is that subsequent reforms should dwell on implementation quality and institutional quality. This is in line with the World Bank's (2004) wider argument that service enhancements depend on relationships among policymakers, providers and citizens, and the same emphasis was made on the intricacy of accountability in huge education systems (Gershberg and Rai, 2015).

2.3. Governance, Accountability and Equity in Reform Implementation

The federal, state, local government, and institutional sectors have collective responsibilities in Nigeria's education system. This gives great opportunities for coordinated governance but makes meaningful accountability more difficult to achieve. The central issue is therefore whether responsibilities are undoubtedly assigned, adequate resources and information are available, and evidence of performance leads to appropriate action (Gershberg & Rai, 2015; World Bank, 2004). In recent times, initiatives such as NESRI are emphasising providing opportunities to strengthen monitoring and evidence-based decision-making through quality assurance and data and digitalisation. It should be noted, however, that information becomes meaningful only when it informs resource allocation, corrective action and improvement (Federal Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Allowing community participation in education is not a bad thing. It brings parents and communities into school governance. It should be taken to be complementary and not a substitute for government responsibility. The essence of School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) is to provide a channel for community participation and social accountability. Their potential contribution lies in creating a closer relationship between schools and the communities they serve. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that the effectiveness of stakeholder participation varies considerably with local leadership, poverty, political context and institutional capacity. In other words, the formation of the group, the integrity of the individuals, and the economic status of the constituted members determine to a large extent the functionality of the group. This is supported by Nchare (2021), who found positive associations between functioning stakeholder participation and some educational outcomes, while also showing that the contribution of SBMCs could not always be separated from other contextual influences.

Teacher accountability similarly requires a balance between professional expectations, monitoring and support. This implies that teachers need an enabling environment to work in full capacity to achieve the set goals. Holding teachers responsible for outcomes without considering infrastructure, instructional resources, preparation and leadership support

risks turning accountability into blame. Effective accountability is therefore best understood as evidence-based, improvement-oriented and responsive to the situation.

The equity implication in education reform is very important. It has been emphasised that equal provision does not necessarily produce equitable opportunity because learners and schools differ in their circumstances (OECD, 2012). A uniform allocation of resources may appear fair while producing unequal opportunities where needs differ substantially. Reform implementation must therefore consider whether resources and support reach disadvantaged communities and whether improvements in inputs translate into meaningful learning. NALABE evidence reinforces the importance of moving beyond enrolment and access to actual learning outcomes.

Thus, governance, accountability and equity are interconnected: governance organises authority and resources; accountability makes responsibilities visible and reviewable; and equity provides a basis for judging whether educational opportunities and benefits are fairly distributed.

2.4. Critical Implications for Education Reform

The evidence reviewed suggests that Nigeria's major challenge is not the absence of education reform but the persistent gap between policy intention and implementation outcomes. Successive reforms have expanded access and introduced new structures, yet weaknesses in coordination, institutional capacity, resource distribution, monitoring and learning outcomes continue to constrain their impact.

The evidence also suggests that reforms should not be judged simply as successes or failures. Some have produced identifiable gains while falling short of their broader objectives. This reinforces the need to distinguish policy design, implementation conditions and outcomes when assessing reform. A more useful approach is therefore to view reform as a continuous process of implementation, evidence, learning and adjustment. Accountability should follow clearly assigned responsibilities; data should inform action rather than merely reporting; and equity should be treated as a criterion for assessing whether reforms are reaching disadvantaged learners and communities.

3. Conclusion

Nigeria's education reform history proves that education reform is not sustained by policy design alone but by the quality of its implementation and the institutions responsible for it. Effective governance, meaningful accountability and equity-sensitive resource allocation are therefore central to translating reform aims into enhanced educational opportunities and learning outcomes. The evidence suggests that future reforms should move beyond measuring the introduction of policies and structures towards examining whether schools are adequately supported, responsibilities are clearly discharged, evidence informs decisions, and disadvantaged learners benefit fairly. Nigeria will be on a stronger path towards workable and equitable education reform if a more coordinated, evidence-based and improvement-oriented approach were adopted.

4. Recommendations

1. Federal and State Ministries of Education should simplify responsibilities by clearly stating the roles of federal agencies, state education authorities, school leaders and other implementing stakeholders in each major reform.

2. The Federal Ministry of Education, UBEC and State Ministries of Education should strengthen the use of education data by using monitoring findings for resource allocation, targeted interventions and corrective action, rather than treating data collection as an end in itself.

3. State Ministries of Education and school authorities should fortify School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs) by making relevant information accessible, providing well-defined responsibilities and defining the specific capacity in which to participate meaningfully in school improvement decisions.

4. Education authorities and school leaders should implement supportive accountability mechanisms for teachers, combining clear performance expectations with suitable instructional resources, professional development and proper remedial measures.

5. Federal and State education authorities should make equity an unambiguous criterion in reform implementation by directing extra resources and support to schools and communities facing greater educational difficulty.

6. The Federal Ministry of Education and State Ministries of Education should reinforce policy continuity by appraising existing reforms, retaining evidently effective components and amending weaknesses before introducing major structural replacements.

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