IMPROVING THE INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY OF BASIC EDUCATION IN NIGERIA THROUGH SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION

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Abstract
Evaluation of the quality of education is normally undertaken for the purposes of ensuring accountability, improvement and sometimes for accreditation. At the basic education level in Nigeria, minimum standards have been produced by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) which schools are expected to reach and maintain if quality educational outcomes are to be achieved. As part of the routine monitoring of Basic Education institutions, UBEC carries out a Whole-School-Evaluation. This is normally preceded by school self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is a collaborative process of internal review which provides an institution with a means of systematically looking at ways of improving learning and facilities on ground in an attempt to enhance quality delivery of its mandate. How should this type of evaluation be implemented? This paper examines how school self-evaluation is currently conducted in Basic schools with the intent to bring out the strengths and weaknesses and thereafter suggests how we can build on the strengths and reduce the over-arching effects of the weaknesses. This is with the intent to ensure that proper implementation of school self-evaluation can be entrenched at the Basic Education level and subsequently lead to institutional quality improvement.

Keywords: Self-evaluation, Basic education, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is an instrument used to achieve the objectives of social, economic and political development of a nation and these are greatly dependent on the human resource developments which are dependent on education. Education can be described as the heart of development process; good quality education serves to enhance the quality of life. A determination of the quality of education entails looking at the following aspects: learning resources, the environment, curriculum, home support, willingness of learners to learn. This is in addition to looking at teaching force, co-curricular activities, performance awards, students and teachers' perspective on the institutional operating management, their opinions and appraisal of education being provided (Hammond, 2013).

The quality education helps to satisfy basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living. The quality of education provided by institutions however, may vary based on multiple factors such as the teaching system, programmes provided, quality of teachers, and the learning environment within which the education is being provided (McAleese, 2013 cited in Arundhathi, Bakisanani, &Thatoyamodimo(2016). Schools provide the platform from which formal education is

provided. Very often, the quality of the schools mirrors what learning outcomes are observable. School quality is determined by looking at the school in all its ramifications. This can be done by the school or by an agency external to the school. When done by the agency external to the school, the assessment is done taking into considerations minimum standards that have been put in place to guide the development at the particular level of education. At the Basic education level in Nigeria, these standards have been developed by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). These standards serve as guide in determining the quality of the school in question. This quality determination as mentioned earlier is done by the school and an agency external to the school. The one done by the school is referred to as school self-evaluation.

School self-evaluation is normally part of accreditation of institutions and programmes and can be used as part of routine school improvement efforts. When done properly, it is expected that it can assist in ensuring institutional quality. How this is done is the focus of this study. The rest of this paper will present the school self-evaluation concept, benefits, implementation and how it can enhance institutional quality.

School Self-evaluation
If one is tautological, then school self-evaluation (SSE) as the name implies is evaluation of the school by itself. The school is composed of human resources that drive the teaching and learning within it. Select teachers, school heads or principals under the guidance of the School Based Management Committee (SBMC)in a systematic way, collaboratively and reflectively review activities within the school. According to MacBeath (2006), SSE is a process of reflection on practice that is done in a systematic and transparent way, with the aim of improving learner, professional and organizational learning. With it, the teachers, principals and the management of schools are able to execute a focused conversation about teaching and learning. In school self-evaluation searching questions are asked, the answers which are obtained are supported by evidence; they show clearly how the answers were obtained. The expectation is that what knowledge emerges is used to plan for improvement and change which would ultimately lead to improved outcomes for learners in the school.

Devos (1998) argues that SSE should be seen as "a process mainly initiated by the school to collect systematic information about the school's functioning, to analyze and judge this information regarding the quality of the school's education and to make decisions that provide recommendations"(pp. 1-2). In such a process, schools are seen as the "basic unit of change and school educators, that is teachers and principals, are not only the agents, but also the initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts"(Smith &O'Day, 1991, p. 235).
In Nigeria, school self-evaluation is mainly heard during accreditation of schools and programmes but the Federal Ministry of Education (2010) is mindful of its performance and hence it produced a manual for quality assurance(Education quality assurance handbook for basic and secondary education in Nigeria). This manual is expected to guide quality assurance activities mainly at level below tertiary level education. School self-evaluation is emphasized in this document. As part of quality assurance of basic education institutions, UBEC has been involved in Whole School Evaluation (WSE). This exercise has school self-evaluationas part of its implementation. School self-evaluation is not new to Teachers and schools. In schools, teachers and School Based Management Committees normally produce a school development plan which guides the development of the school. This document outlines a vision and mission for the school.

With the school development plan which includes the approved standards, schools over the years are able to identify what is working well and what might need to be improved in their schools through SSE. Through school self-evaluation, evidence is gathered to inform the discussions of teachers, head teachers/ principals and SBMCs about teaching and learning. Discussion process involves asking questions like 'what did we set out to achieve?', 'What did we achieve?', 'what factors supported or inhibited attainment?' and 'what might we focus on in the future?' Collecting the information to answer these questions will be an opportunity to use not only existing information in the school but also to seek the views of parents and students. School personnel as a result of the SSE will work collaboratively to change their practices which would eventually lead to improvement in the learning experiences for students. This can be invigorating and professionally rewarding as teachers come to see how much SSE can support them in their work with students.

School self-evaluation is an empowerment instrument as schools can objectively tell their own story. Schools operate in different contexts and their work is never the same. The SSE is more or less a process of the school getting to know itself. During school self-evaluation, reflective enquiry into the work of the school is carried out. In Nigeria, UBEC as an intervention agency for basic education has developed a quality assurance framework and reviewed the standards for basic education. It has also reviewed the instruments for quality assurance. Indicators for quality of basic education have been outlined. These to wit include achievement and standards of the school, learners' personal value, skills and participation, teaching and learning, curriculum and other activities, care guidance and safety, learning environment, and effectiveness of school leadership and management. Each of these indicators has items which are expected to be rated on a scale of outstanding, good, fair, poor and very poor. The SSE instruments goes further to request for an assessment of each indicator and provision of reasons for the decision. Areas for improvement are also requested for as these can be used in refocusing the school development plan to address issues that fall below expectations. It is an evidence-based approach which involves gathering evidence from a range of sources and making judgements with a view to bringing about improvements in pupils' learning.

Research indicates that meaningful SSE, focused on teaching and learning, and on improving outcomes for pupils, brings about improvement (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2012; MacBeath, 1999). These authors also ascertained that the overarching goals for SSE are twofold, namely to improve the overall quality of schools and to improve teaching and learning. Improving the quality of schools includes matters such as social relations between members, organisational climate and culture (Freiberg, 1999).

Managing School Self-evaluation

The importance of SSE evaluation has been clearly articulated. The UBEC has tried to address some issues as they relate to the implementation of SSE. An appropriate framework that has been seen as a difficulty to address has been put in place. It has gone ahead to construct needed instruments which have been validated that can be used to collect and analyse data from different aspects of school functioning that could lead to sustainable school improvement. This is as there is little evidence from published literature that assisting school stakeholders to engage in any improvement programme, without providing them with a validated framework and appropriate tools to identify priorities for improvement, necessarily meets their needs or improves school effectiveness (Smith & Hatton, 1992).

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Who controls and drives the SSE? Academics, teachers and trade unions worldwide have been calling for self-evaluation to be at the heart of school improvement and Barth (1990) believes that effectively, schools should be improved from within. It is unlikely that we can get to the heart of what a school is truly like. Since the primary goal of school self-evaluation should be to help schools develop and improve through critical self-reflection then it has to be driven from within. To do this effectively, teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills to be able to evaluate teaching and learning in their own classrooms. This can then be complemented with an external review in order to enhance and support good practice. In this way, external review becomes a validation process for school self-evaluation.

The management of UBEC believes that school self-evaluation should be part of the process of school improvement. That is why it has created a self-evaluation framework that examined achievement and standards of the school, learners' personal value, skills and participation, teaching and learning, curriculum and other activities, care guidance and safety, learning environment, and effectiveness of school leadership and management and overall effectiveness and efficiency. As put by MacBeath (2005), while in many countries school inspection has traditionally been the path to quality assurance it is now seen as more economical and growth promoting to put evaluation in the hands of schools themselves.

It is anticipated that effective schools, where performance management has been introduced successfully, evaluation connects well with established policies for monitoring, appraisal and evaluation. Teachers have specific targets for improvement, linked to the progress made by learners during the year. This provides a clear understanding of what needs to be done. When the process is supported by effective professional development, performance data can be collected and analysed comprehensively. Through this, relevant comparisons are made with similar schools, trends are identified and challenging targets are set.

As SSE involves the identification of areas for development, this can act as a 'major catalyst for improvement' (Sammons, 2008). The study by Ofsted (2008) found that besides being supported by strong leadership and putting in place measures to improve the school climate such as setting high expectations for behaviour, schools appeared to have developed 'effective systems for self-evaluation'. The need for school self-evaluation is therefore imperative. The next section outlines the process for its implementation.

Process of School Self-evaluation

The self-evaluation process has been described as a process for helping schools improve, which should be shaped by themselves, and integrated into their routine management systems (Chapman, 2008). Furthermore, it is argued this should be a collaborative practice involving stakeholders' views and should incorporate annual updates to reflect on the impact of the school's actions on its pupils. Thus schools should regularly ask themselves questions about how they are doing and what could be done better. Figure 1 presents the process of SSE evaluation. The starting point of any SSE is the school asking the question 'How are we doing?' This question is normally answered by gathering evidences by using the SSE instrument. The information gathered with this instrument are normally a product of evidences from school records, sample pupils' notebooks, examination questions, marking schemes, assignments and interviews of teachers, parents and students.
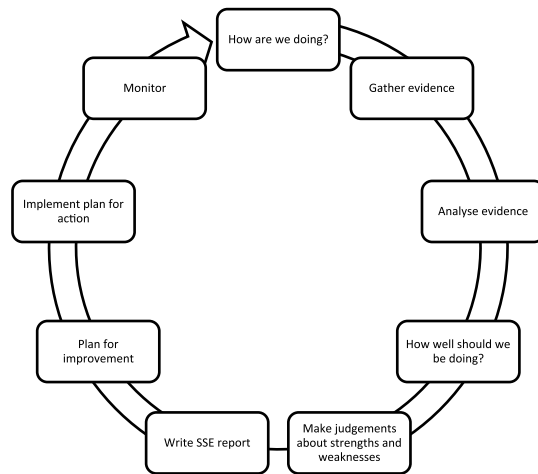
Figure 1: School Self-Evaluation Process

This information gathered is analyzed and compared with the expected level of performance indicated by the question 'How well should we be doing?' The analysis involves identifying standards that have been attained, comparison of the attainment with previous years, national norms and the trends are also carefully examined. The next stage involves making judgements about the strengths and weaknesses requiring improvement. Thereafter, the SSE report is written taking into considerations the questions: 'What did we set out to do?', 'What did we achieve?', 'what factors supported or inhibited our attainment?', and 'what might we focus on in the future?' Based on the recommendations emergent from the report, plan for improvement is articulated. This is then implemented and the implementation closely monitored to determine compliance with the plan. Thereafter, the question 'how are we doing' is asked again. This process of implementation can lead to school improvement.

School Self-Evaluation and Institutional Quality Improvement

The discussion so far points to the fact that SSE is a school-based approach to determining the value of the school from the eyes of those within it and has a stake in its functioning. To drive the improvement of quality of the institution, it is a must that all the stakeholders within the institution must objectively carry out all the SSE activities and be willing to implement the emergent recommendations from the exercise. A basic requirement is the understanding of the minimum standards put in place by the supervising agency which in this case is UBEC. These standards have been outline based on a framework which is hinged on the input-process-output model. The inputs include the resources (human, material and financial), policies and infrastructure. The process includes interactions at the classroom and school levels and the knowledge include knowledge, attitude and values of the learners. Standards have been specified for each element in the components. As the main focus of SSE is on teaching and learning, therefore, all factors which affect these must be examined during the SSE within the school.

The evaluation of teaching and learning involves looking at learners' acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes, teachers facilitating learning, and even the knowledge of the teacher. Support for learners in the school and management and leadership in the school are potent factors in the realization of the goals of the school. Learners' personal skills, values and participation to a large extent are important; it focuses on the learners' interest in

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education and enjoyment of it among other things. Another dimension is achievement and standards which considers issues like the extent to which learners make progress using continuous assessment, internal and external examinations, reach standards set for their classes, write meaningful sentences, etc.

The curriculum and other activities interest is based on provision of curriculum resources in all subjects to support teaching and learning, availability of functional library, adequate availability of sports and recreational facilities, availability of garden, among others. Another area that is focused on is care, guidance and safety; some of the issues examined include availability of potable water supply to promote learners healthy living, provision of functional toilets, school health facilities, immunization coverage and promotion of safety skills where learners are taught how to stay safe. The learning environment is equally important and issues evaluated include availability of conducive, spacious, accessible, safe and secured learning environment. Availability of functional ICT facilities, classrooms not being congested, functional laboratory, library and workshop are also subject of evaluation. Lastly, the effectiveness of leadership and management is emphasized. Personal and professional example provided by school head, school development plan developed every year, teaching is monitored and use of sanctions as appropriate, among other things are considered.

Each of these seven dimensions are expected to be assessed on a scale of outstanding, good, fair, poor and very poor. The school is also expected to provide reasons for the judgement arrived at. Finally, the school is expected to list the most important areas that the school needs to focus on to improve the quality of education for the learners. These areas actually constitute issues of concern to the school that serve to direct a school self-evaluation implementation. It should be noted that the self-evaluation by the school may not all the time focus on all issues as contained in the minimum standards document. For example, issues of attrition among staff and learners could be very predominant and one can attempt to address it through a school self-evaluation. This in itself would require gathering of evidence from both present and withdrawn learners and teachers, SBMC. These evidences could point to issues of poor academic performance among learners, high-handedness of school management. When this happens, more evidence has to be collected which eventually are all analyzed in an attempt to redress the issue of concern.

It is pertinent that schools have to determine their strengths and ensure that these are continuously sustained in addition to identifying and prioritizing areas which need improvement. To enhance objectivity, the decisions made should be guided by the content of the minimum standards. Benchmarks are important and these must be clearly specified to see if the actions result in success. The change has to be managed effectively and involves a consideration of key personnel, so that initiatives are embedded in practice. Action plans include success criteria which are measurable and relate closely to the achievement of students. SMART targets must be established. With these, evaluation can be easily carried out as standards have been clearly outlined.

Table 1: SMART targets

SMART targets are:	
Specific	We need to know exactly what we want to accomplish with all the details and how it will look like when we have achieved it.
Measurable	It should be possible to assess the progress made.
Achievable	The goal should be within reach given the current situation.
Realistic	The goal has to be relevant to the school"s aims and achievable within the resources and timescales.
Timed	A deadline for completing the goal has to be specified.

The next stage of the cycle involves implementation of the development plan followed by regular and rigorous monitoring. A range of approaches to ensure that the developments are actually leading to improvement are utilized. In other words, monitoring makes sure we are doing what we say we are doing or what we have agreed to do. Thereafter the question 'how are we doing?' is asked and the whole cycle of SSE begins.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Quality assurance is an important instrument for driving school improvement. Its use in basic educational institutions is being driven with great zeal and commitment by UBEC. This is evidenced by provision of a quality assurance framework, standards for basic education and instruments for quality assurance. As part of the quality assurance implementation, SSE is expected to be carried out. Its benefits have been well discussed in this presentation. The process involved in it has equally been provided and how it can be implemented clearly articulated.

To achieve the benefits, school personnel have to be well prepared and trained to acquire skills, knowledge and values needed for its objective implementation. Such skills include ability to understand what the SSE form is requesting for, how to analyse the information in addition to writing a report which can be helpful in efforts to generate a school improvement plan. Through these activities institutional quality can be enhanced.

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