

# RURAL EDUCATION FOR WHAT? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOLING IN SOME RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

*One of the most enduring concerns of government and educational planners in developing countries is how to reduce rural-urban inequalities in educational provision. The aim is to ensure that all children have equal access to education of good quality irrespective of region, ethnicity and social class. This paper critically examines the provision of primary education in some rural communities in Nigeria. It analyses the teaching of the four core subjects of the National Curriculum in terms of teacher quality and supply, the availability of adequate teaching and learning facilities and the quality of the teaching-learning process; and demonstrates that, despite the quantitative expansion of the school system in rural areas, rural-urban inequalities in education still persist, particularly in terms of the quality of educational provision. The paper's major claim is that, in underdeveloped nations like Nigeria, rural schooling, despite its rhetoric of intent, is a veritable tool for the reproduction of social inequalities in the wider political economy.*

## INTRODUCTION

The reduction of rural-urban inequalities in education and the promotion of equality of educational opportunity irrespective of ethnicity, region, gender and social class have been the defining characteristics of educational policy making in Nigeria's post-colonial history. Every government from 1960 (when Britain granted independence) to date has sought to define its role as that of promoting national economic development, social mobility and the reduction of educational disparities (social class, region and gender) inherited from the British colonialists. Education is seen as the most important tool for national development and has witnessed unprecedented expansion in the past four decades. A good example of this is the geometric increase in enrolment into primary schools which increased from a mere 2.9 million in 1960 to 19.4 million by 2001. Similarly, the number of primary schools rose from a couple of thousands in 1960 to 49,306 by 2001 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004).

This no doubt is a phenomenal increase in the participation rate in primary education but, as will be argued later in the paper, this quantitative expansion of the primary education sector does not necessarily translate into the reduction of educational inequalities, particularly in terms of the reduction of inequalities of condition and outcome.

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This paper critically examines the provision of primary education in some rural communities in Nigeria. It applies the concept of "equality of condition" (Turner, 1986) to selected data from the nationwide survey on the teaching of the four core subjects of the National Curriculum conducted by the National Teachers' Institute in Kaduna in 2004 (Umar & Durodola, 2004). The author has operationally defined "equality of condition" as consisting of teacher quality and supply, the availability of adequate teaching learning facilities and the quality of the teaching learning process. The paper has three sections. Section one is a brief elaboration of the concept of equality of educational opportunity in terms of its two most important dimensions – i.e., equality of condition and equality of outcomes. These two dimensions are then used in section two to examine critically the data on rural–urban inequalities in some communities. The paper seeks to demonstrate that, despite the quantitative expansion of the school system in rural areas, rural–urban inequalities in education persist, particularly in terms of the quality of educational provision. Section three discusses the findings of the survey on the teaching of the four core subjects and argues that if the objectives of the policy of promoting equality of educational opportunity are to be attained there has to be a reasonable degree of parity in the quality and adequacy of educational inputs (e.g., teachers, textbooks, teaching–learning facilities) between urban and rural schools.

## THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Despite its seeming popularity, equality of educational opportunity is a hotly contested concept. There is a lot of disagreement as to its nature and as to whether it is a useful heuristic tool that can be used to interrogate educational systems in terms of their openness, justice and effectiveness (Levine & Bane, 1975). Equality of educational opportunity can be defined as a situation in which "no one should be prevented through social or economic impediment from getting the best possible schooling from which he [*sic*] can benefit. Irrelevant matters to do with social class, economic status, nationality, sex, ethnic origin, religious affiliation, race or geographical location should have no bearing upon access to schooling" (Entwistle, 1979, p. 8). The Nigerian National Policy on Education defines equality of educational opportunity as "providing access to education to all Nigerians irrespective of social class, ethnic origins, gender, region or religion", so as to enable everyone to develop her or his full potential and also to contribute to national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998, p. 2).

The concept has received a lot of attention from scholars and policy makers in all developing countries, mainly because the educational systems inherited from their respective colonial governments denied access to the vast majority of the people and were geared towards meeting the needs of the colonial powers rather than promoting the development of the countries they ruled. Thus the first task of post-colonial governments in Africa, Asia and Latin America was to transform their educational systems (see also Henderson, this issue) into veritable tools for national development which in essence required not only curricular reforms but more importantly the democratisation of access to basic and higher education by all citizens irrespective of social class, gender, geographical location and religion (Thompson, 1981).

As elaborated by Turner (1986) the concept of equality of educational opportunity has at least one very important dimension, *viz.* equality of condition. He writes:

The concept of equality of opportunity is closely related to and somewhat inseparable from the notion of equality of condition. Equality of opportunity rewards those who have ability and who are prepared to exercise their skills in the interest of personal development in a competitive situation. However, where parents can pass on advantages to their children, then the starting point for achievement is unequal since for example working class children will start with disadvantages which they have inherited from their parents ... In order for equality of educational opportunity to have any significant content, it is essential to guarantee equality of condition[;] that is[,] all competitors in the race should start at the same point with appropriate handicaps. (Turner, 1986, pp. 35-36)

However, it is not simply the lack of cultural capital on the part of working class children which makes them not succeed at school compared with their middle class counterparts. There is also the failure of the state in many developing countries to equalise inputs such as teaching-learning facilities, funding, an adequate supply of teachers of good quality, instructional materials such as textbooks, etc. (Fritzberg, 2001). Even in developed countries like the United States, prior to the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 by the United States Congress, there was the tendency by state governments to ignore equity standards that deal with inputs such as funding, facilities, teacher supply, etc. For example, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education noted that as at 1997 "... in most states, as in most of the nation, opportunity to learn standards specifying the various learning conditions to which all students should have access were not on the policy agenda" (CPRE, 1997, p. 9 in Fritzberg, 2003). The No Child Left Behind Act requires states among other things to: implement standards-based assessments in reading and mathematics for pupils; participate in National Assessment of Educational Progress tests; and develop adequate yearly progress (AYP) standards aimed at ensuring that all pupils reach a proficient or advanced level of achievement within 12 years (United States Congress, 2001).

However, this is not the case in developing countries where the emphasis of education policy making and implementation has for decades been on a quantitative expansion of the school system so as to provide more access to more and more children, with little attention being given to the quality of education being provided by the schools. For example, educational policy in Nigeria has focused on expanding the school system so as to enrol more students and achieve universal primary education and the reduction of regional and gender disparities. Thus the number of primary schools increased from 40,204 in 1997 to 49,306 in 2001 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 33), and enrolment also increased from 17,907,010 in 1999 to 24,563,004 in 2003 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 8).

However, this attempt to provide equal access to primary education by building more schools has not addressed the other dimension of equality of educational opportunity, namely equality of condition which in the context of this paper is defined as teacher quality and supply, the availability of adequate teaching-learning materials and facilities and the quality of the teaching-learning process. Not enough resources are invested in the provision of adequate teaching-learning materials and facilities or the recruitment of good quality teachers. Several nationwide surveys have indicated that most schools lack basic facilities and instructional materials and have a high proportion of unqualified teachers (Tee-Kay Consultancy, 2005; Umar & Durodola, 2004). This raises questions about educational equity, which is concerned with the provision of

access and adequate resources. A quantitative expansion of the school system to facilitate access is not enough; there must also be a guarantee that there is an equal opportunity for attaining the minimum level of academic achievement for all children irrespective of their social origins, region or gender. As will be seen in the data on rural-urban inequality in educational provision in Nigeria, presented in the next section, the net effect of the neglect of equality of condition in the provision of education has worsened existing rural-urban disparities.

However, even in terms of the provision of access and the reduction of gender and regional inequalities, a lot more needs to be done. Despite the modest achievements recorded in enrolments, there are regional and gender variations in access; and the Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) – i.e., the percentage of school age children (6-11 year olds) attending primary school – is far lower than expected. The NAR was reported to be lowest for six year olds (39%) and highest for nine year olds (67%). NAR is also much higher in the south (e.g., 86% in the South West) than in the north (e.g., 28% in the North West) and some states in the north, notably Jigawa, Bauchi, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi and Yobe, have primary schools with less than 25% NAR (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 34). Similarly there is a serious gender gap in terms of access and participation. Available figures indicate that the female share in primary school enrolment in 2001 was 35% for the North West, 38% for the North East, 45% for the North Central, 50% for the South East and South-South and 51% for the South West zones respectively. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), which refers to the number of pupils at a particular level of schooling – (irrespective of age) – as a proportion of the number of children in the relevant age group, is a good indicator of access and inclusion. The GER can be more than 100% if there are over aged or under age children or there are repeaters. The total GER for males was 100.4%, while that of females was 82.6%, with a gender gap of 17.8%. The Apparent Completion Rate – i.e., the number of children in primary six as a percentage of the number of pupils in primary one five years earlier – also suggests a high level of wastage at the primary level and the transition rate from primary school to junior secondary school is less than 50% (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 36).

## **PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SELECTED RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA: A SURVEY**

Primary education in Nigeria as in many other countries is a huge enterprise involving nearly 19,342,639 children in 48,458 schools with 451,295 teachers (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004). The rural share of school and enrolment numbers is about 60%. Primary education is for 6-11 year olds and consists of six years' duration. A national curriculum is implemented throughout the country. The country operates a federal system of government but the provision of primary education is mainly the responsibility of the 36 states and 774 local governments.

Some of the goals of primary education as articulated in the National Policy on Education are to:

1. inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;

2. lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
3. give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society; and
4. develop in the child the ability to adapt to his/her changing environment. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1998, p. 14)

The major concern of this study is to assess the teaching of the four core subjects of the National Curriculum (English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies) in some rural communities in four states – Gombe, Adamawa, Yobe and Borno – in north-eastern Nigeria in terms of one of the important dimensions of equality of educational opportunity, namely equality of condition. In specific terms the study sought to:

1. determine the quality of teachers in terms of their qualifications;
2. determine the availability and adequacy of teaching-learning facilities (e.g., classrooms) and instructional materials (e.g., textbooks and audio-visual materials); and
3. determine the quality of instructional delivery.

The study covered 44 randomly selected schools with a total enrolment of 126,265 pupils and 1,410 teachers and involved the use of questionnaires for teachers, head teachers and pupils, together with direct observations of classroom interaction. This paper is part of a nationwide survey of the teaching of the four core subjects conducted by the National Teachers' Institute in Kaduna in 2004 (Umar & Durodola, 2004).

## THE STUDY'S FINDINGS

### The quality of teachers in the sampled schools

Out of the 1,410 teachers in the sampled schools, 99 (7%) have first degrees (BA/BSc), while 463 (32.8%) possess the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) which is a three-year, post-secondary qualification and officially the approved minimum teaching qualification. Additionally, 848 (60.2%) possess teaching qualifications lower than the NCE, – i.e., the Grade Two Teachers' certificate (TC11), and the Diploma and Pivotal Teachers' Certificate. Table 1 summarises the findings on teachers' qualifications. It should be noted that primary school teachers in Nigeria are expected to teach competently all four core subjects – i.e., they are generalists.

Table 1: Number and Qualification of Teachers (N = 1,410)

Qualification	Gombe		Adamawa		Yobe		Borno	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
BA/BSc/BEEd	28	6	1	2	3	6	29	24
NCE	83	47	32	62	20	28	49	141
TCH	75	48	19	23	48	70	111	149
Diploma	23	17	12	11	12	3	53	31
PTTP	13	4	1	4	9	9	3	3
Others	12	12	10	12	22	19	0	0
	N =	368	N =	189	N =	260	N =	593

**Availability and adequacy of instructional materials and facilities in the sampled schools vis-à-vis enrolment**

Instructional materials were operationally defined as: copies of the National Curriculum, pupils' textbooks and Teachers' Guides in all four core subjects and audio-visual materials such as maps, wall charts, diagrams, media and science kits. Table 2 below summarises the study's findings on instructional materials and facilities.

Table 2: Availability and Adequacy of Instructional Materials and Facilities: Teachers' Responses (N = 1,410)

	Available	Not Available	Adequate	Inadequate
Copies of the National Curriculum	423	987	320	103
Pupil's Textbooks	689	721	329	360
Teacher's Guide	701	709	520	181
Teaching Aids	982	428	761	221
Classrooms	1401	9	1401	0
Reading room/library	148	1262	0	148

The table clearly shows that the rural schools sampled for this study are very under-resourced. Basic educational inputs which are essential for effective teaching and learning, such as textbooks, Teachers' Guides and teaching aids, are in short supply in all four core subjects. Thus a conducive environment for teaching and learning does not exist.

### Delivery of instruction

The study also sought, through direct classroom observation over a period of six weeks, to determine the most dominant teaching methods used in teaching the four core subjects and the extent to which the teaching methods used encouraged active learning/thinking rather than rote learning/memorisation and pupil passivity.

An analysis of the qualitative data obtained through direct observation indicates that the most frequently used teaching methods are: lecture, dictation and demonstration. These methods were used very consistently by more than 80% of the 1,410 teachers teaching in the rural schools. Teacher talk tended to dominate classroom interaction despite the fact that these were young children who could have been taught through other methods that would have engaged them in active and meaningful learning based on constructivist principles.

### **DISCUSSION**

As indicated above, the rural schools sampled for the study do not have enough teachers of good quality, if the approved minimum teaching qualification – i.e., NCE – is used as the yardstick for measuring teacher quality. Over 60% of the teachers are unqualified, which is far above the 35% national figure for unqualified teachers in the primary education sector. There are many reasons for this high proportion of unqualified teachers in the sampled schools and rural communities in general. These include:

- Many rural schools are often remote and inaccessible and lack basic social amenities such as potable water, electricity, roads, hospitals, etc., rendering them unattractive to teachers, who often view their being posted to remote and isolated schools as punitive. This is particularly so because there are no incentives that would make teaching in rural schools attractive.
- There is a general shortfall in teacher supply since the launching of the Universal Basic Education program in September 1999. The annual teacher requirement is over 40,000, which is far beyond the capacity of the conventional teacher training institutions. Local Education Authorities tend to address shortfalls in teacher supply by recruiting unqualified or even untrained teachers, thus increasing the proportion of teachers of low quality in rural schools in particular and the primary sector in general. The situation is worsened by the high teacher attrition rate, which is estimated to be 10% annually and is worsening because the salaries and conditions of service of primary school teachers are very poor as compared with teaching at secondary or tertiary levels.

Lack of adequate instructional materials and facilities raises questions about the quality of education provided in the rural schools and demonstrates local authorities' neglect of quality in pursuit of quantity so as to meet enrolment targets. Furthermore, the dearth of instructional facilities and materials implies that an important dimension of equality of educational opportunity, namely equality of condition, is totally neglected and raises doubts about the government's commitment to providing equality of educational opportunity. There is no level playing field and pupils in rural schools are at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* their urban counterparts who have at their disposal adequate teaching-learning facilities. This inequality of condition plus the fact that rural children

do not have the cultural capital that will enable them to succeed at school serves only to reproduce rural-urban disparities in education.

The dominance of teaching methods that emphasise rote learning and memorisation rather than critical thinking and reflection raises serious questions about the appropriateness, effectiveness and general quality of existing pre-service teacher training programs, and constitutes a strong impediment to the actualisation of the goals of primary education such as “inculcating permanent literacy and numeracy” and laying a “sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy on Education, 1998, p. 14).

The curriculum of pre-service teacher education is now recognised as an important area of intervention, given the commitment of most developing countries to Universal Basic Education and the improvement of teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools. For instance, the Multi-site Teacher Education Research Project (MUSTER), which covered several countries, drew attention to the “general dissatisfaction with the levels of achievement and competence amongst newly trained teachers”. It is contended that:

The MUSTER analyses of teacher education curriculum issues lead to many insights into the quality and relevance of materials for existing programmes. The picture these paint is one that suggests that investment in curriculum development is long over due and that much which is currently available falls short of what is needed and what is possible. Large parts of the teacher education curricula seem to have been adapted from the academic curricula of school or university rather than designed for adult learners or for the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills...The curricula need to be reconceptualised but in ways that keep in touch with local content and realities. (Lewin & Stuart: 2003, p. 185)

Although pre-service teacher education cannot be the only factor that determines pupils' learning achievement, it is certainly a key factor, particularly in the Nigerian context, because for most teachers the pre-service program is the only formal training they ever undergo and little or no opportunities for regular re-training exist. Thus even though factors such as the availability of relevant books and teaching-learning facilities and resources are important, the quality and competence of the teachers play a pre-eminent role in determining learners' achievement. Available research evidence indicates that the learning achievement of pupils is generally low and teachers are often ill-prepared for the realities of primary and secondary schools in Nigeria (Umar, 2004).

Recent concerns about the inadequacy of teacher preparation and its impact on pupils' learning achievement have led to the establishment of a committee for the review of existing pre-service teacher education curricula in October 2004. The committee was expected to undertake an empirical study of pre-service teacher education curricula so as to determine their relevance and adequacy *vis-à-vis* the needs and realities of the nation's primary and secondary schools. It focused on the following issues:

1. the pedagogical skills, knowledge and competencies required for effective teaching in secondary and primary schools – i.e., what teachers need to know and be able to do if they are to teach effectively in the schools;
2. the extent to which the pre-service curricula adequately prepare teachers for teaching in primary and secondary schools; and



3. how the pre-service curricula can be reformed and be made more relevant to the existential realities of primary and secondary schools.

The committee found that the pre-service curricula are deficient in both subject matter content and pedagogical skills and have failed to prepare teachers adequately for the needs and realities of schools. The committee developed a framework that specifies clearly the knowledge and skills that pre-service curricula must teach if teacher training institutions are to produce teachers who are competent and effective. The specific areas of curricula reform identified by the committee include:

- knowledge of the subjects taught at the primary school level;
- knowledge of the textbooks, curricular modules and other materials being used at the primary level;
- an in-depth mastery of subject contents and the most suitable methods of teaching them to young learners;
- mastery of the language of instruction;
- language across the curriculum;
- remedial and special education and the teaching of life skills;
- field experience and internship; and
- multigrade teaching in rural schools. (Tee-Kay Consultancy, 2005, pp. 97-98)

The combined effect of inadequate instructional materials and facilities, the dearth of qualified teachers and the paradigmatic stature of methods that promote the regurgitation of facts adversely affect the academic performance of pupils in rural schools.

The Assessment of Learning Achievement of Primary Four pupils in Nigerian schools conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education in 2003 indicates that:

- pupils in rural schools perform at significantly lower levels on numeracy skills. The mean score for rural schools pupils is 32.53% while that of urban school pupils is 35.2%;
- pupils from rural schools performed at significantly lower levels in literacy than those from urban schools;
- pupils in rural schools performed at significantly lower levels in life skills tests with a mean score of 41.7% as compared with 45.58 for pupils in urban schools. (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004)

However, even if the problem of inappropriate curricula is addressed, the issue of teacher quality in rural schools needs to be tackled. As Table 1 shows, not only are there serious shortfalls in teacher supply in rural schools but the number of teachers who possess the Nigeria Certificate in Education, which is the approved minimum teaching qualification, is grossly inadequate. For most teachers, teaching in a rural school is unattractive not only because such schools are under-resourced but more importantly because of the non-availability or inadequacy of basic social amenities such as electricity, telephone, roads, medical services, etc. This is not peculiar to Nigeria or developing countries, and is indeed a universal problem. As Holloway (2002, p. 139) noted in the context of the United States, rural schools "face challenges in attracting certified teachers to communities where medical services, entertainment and other

amenities are limited and often non-existent". Given the difficulty education authorities face in attracting qualified teachers, they resort to recruiting less qualified teachers for rural schools, which in turn engenders low levels of academic achievement. Not only is it difficult for rural education authorities to recruit teachers of good quality but more important is their inability to retain them (see also Motley, Rossi & King, this issue). While teacher retention is a nationwide problem, it is more serious in rural schools given the non-availability or inadequacy of basic social amenities and the lack of a suitable incentive system that can attract good quality teachers to rural schools.

## CONCLUSION

Equality of educational opportunity will remain unattainable in Nigeria and indeed other developing countries unless the problem of inequality of condition between rural and urban schools is adequately addressed. The state must ensure that there is parity of educational input between rural and urban schools and that steps are taken to deal with other relevant non-school disadvantages that rural pupils face. However, of all the inadequacies of rural schools identified by this study, the most serious is the poor quality of teachers and the lack of opportunities for continuing professional development (see also Motley, Rossi & King, this issue). These must be given priority if the goals of primary education as articulated in the National Policy on Education are to be actualised.

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