RESEARCH ARTICLE

Managing Learning Environment in Schools for improved Quality Education in the Post-COVID 19 Era

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Abstract

Any education that is not qualitative enough would impose more danger to the learners and the society at large. This paper examined managing the learning environment in schools for improved quality education. The secondary school was the focus while the principals were the target. The presentation of the meaning of learning environment and quality education was captured. The paper also explained who the principal is and his responsibilities concerning the educational managerial conception. The paper looked at the various components of the learning environment and how they could be managed to produce an acceptable learning environment and its implication in the post-COVID 19 eras. In the end, the paper concluded, among other things, that it is only when the principals are innovative, creative, and proactive with their understanding of the learning environment that the so desired quality education be achieved.

1. Introduction

No education, no matter the level, can rise above the learning environment. Therefore, the intendance of both the material, human, and other related services within the learning environment, become imperative, hence, the place of the school administrator, especially at the secondary school system. The learning environment has often been relegated and most times misconstrued to be only the four walls of the classroom, but in practice, this assumption is usually not tenable. [1]

The learning environment is an all-encompassing concept that means an educational realm or scholastic world, which does not begin and end with where only teaching and learning take place, but any place where knowledge is impacted to the desired. Be it face-to-face, online, that is, virtual or hybrid learning environments, if the conditions and practices are not in compliance with the stipulated standard and acceptable benchmarks, it will be as good as being called an ordinary learning classroom. [2]

Regrettably, the inability of the major stakeholders in the secondary school project, especially the school principals, to understand, in the entirety the meaning, nature, and aspects of the learning environment, have often led to criticisms, rejection, and misplaced priorities in the achievement of the expected individual, organizational and societal goals for the establishment of the secondary schools in Nigeria. [3]

From a broad perspective and specifically the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) 4th edition, it is stipulated that the secondary education should be to prepare the individual (student) for:

- Useful living within the society; and
- Higher education

The education shall also:

- Provide all primary school leavers with the opportunity for education of a higher level, irrespective of sex, social status, religious or ethnic background;
- Offer diversified curriculum to cater for differences in talent, opportunities and future roles;
- Provide trained manpower in the applied science, technology and commerce at sub-professional grades;
- Develop and promote Nigerian languages, art and culture in the context of world cultural heritage;
- Inspire its student with a desire for self-improvement and achievement of excellence;
- Foster national unity with an emphasis on the common ties that unite us in our diversity;
- Raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect the dignity of labour, appreciate those

values specified under our broad national goals and live as good citizens;

- Provide technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development (P.19)

The pertinent question here is, have the broad and specific goals been met? If yes, to what extent? If no, what then should be done now that the nation, like other international communities, is faced with the post-COVID challenges.

Our observations from several years of interactions and visitations to our secondary schools, private and public, in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria in general, have shown that 80% to 90% of the education received by the Nigerian child begins and ends in the classrooms; what a pitiable situation. No wonder that graduates from these schools appear to be unmarketable, unproductive, half-baked, and are unable to compete favourably with their peers from other parts of the world. [4]

To Umar the negative influence of the classrooms on students' academic performance, in general, has been a concern to all partners in the educational arena. He further found out from his study that there is a need for stakeholders to improve classroom and non-classroom environments to make them more conducive to learning, thereby improving the quality of education. It is against this backdrop that this paper sought to examine through this conceptual approach, how managing the learning environment in secondary schools can improve the quality of education received by the students in the post-COVID 19 eras. [5]

2. Learning Environment: What and What Not

The learning environment is not the school environment and classrooms alone, neither is it only the activities that happen between the teacher and the learners within the designated enclave, mapped out for academic transactions. It refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and culture in which students learn. In other words, it is the condition and influence which a learner comes in contact with, resulting in a series of complex interactions and ensuring change in behavior.

Suffice it to further say that this environment is not limited to schools, it includes the home, religious enclaves, the society, peer groups, recreational centres, market places, hospitals, motor parks, and any other place that the learners come in contact with throughout the learning stages within a particular academic level. To Oduwaye, it is the surrounding circumstance that affects learning; an environment that can be as wide as a particular society and may be viewed as an educational institution. [6]

In another development, it will be disastrous to conclude that the learning environment of today is limited to only the physical surroundings as discussed above, rather, due to the new normal, it is more than the structures, it is now about the invisible interactions and relationships within the global space. This propelled Eli (2005) and Sariola (2011), to assert that the space in

context can be conceptualized as being an interaction between physical and social spaces, where the teachers' and students' activities within which learning is seen as an active process in a multi-information and co-operational network environment, can be made possible.

The world is currently built as a global village with an international education beyond borders, hence, the absence of these learning environments portrays doom for any society or school system. [7]

3. Components of the Learning Environment

Any learning environment that is not capable of providing some very important elements that are both teacher and learner-friendly, is not a learning environment. For students to learn, they must feel safe, engaged, connected, and supported in their classrooms, schools, and other spaces. Interestingly, the characteristics of the learners, the goals for the teaching and learning, the activities that will support learning, the assessment strategies that will best measure and drive learning, and the culture that influences the learning environment cannot be ignored at this juncture. In line with the above assertion, Alliance for Excellent Education outlines four components of learning environment to include:

- Safety
- Engagement
- Connectedness, and
- Support

It is against this backdrop that Movchan (2021) further posited that a learning environment must be a diverse platform where users engage and interact to learn new skills, while learners can learn in an array of settings, and a more preferred and accurate alternative to the traditional classroom. This is not limited to the traditional room full of desks and chalkboards. [8]

According to the cited document above, safety means that students must feel safe, both physically and mentally. They must be respected, supported, and feel welcome. Engagement, on the other hand, means that there must be personalized learning, where the student-centred approach is encouraged in learning. Connectedness means that the learners must be connected to the teachers, staff, students, and the outside world; this can be achievable through social and emotional learning. Being supportive means that the learning environment must provide a relationship between the teachers, classmates, administrators, family, community, and its members. [9]

As Movchan further argues, the learning environment is an expression that is a lot broader than these components. The term comprises of:

- Learners' characteristics
- Learning and teaching goals
- Activities that support learning
- Assessment strategies that drive and measure learning
- A culture that directly infuses a learning

environment.

As he posits, typically, social, physical, psychological, and cultural factors involved in the learning environment deeply affect the learners' learning capabilities. This simply concluded to mean that if the learning atmosphere is not conducive to gaining new knowledge or skills, it will be hard for learners to remain engrossed or interested. [10]

4. School Principals and Management of Learning Environment

As often argued in several studies, conceptual reviews, and another academic forums, the whole success of the learning environment, especially at the secondary schools, begins and ends with the school principal. The principal, also known as the school administrator, is the head of the entire secondary school community. He or she shoulders the responsibilities of making sure that the administrative, supervisory, financial, and academic duties, including teaching and learning, are dutifully carried out on a daily routine in the school.

According to Roberts (2019), the principal must be versatile. On any given day, the principal must be a curriculum consultant, budget analyst, public relations representative, mediator, disciplinarian, and most importantly a manager. To this backdrop, as a manager, the principal must be vested with management in its fullest stratifications, which means that management can be seen as a special and innate attribute deposited in humans, to be able to bring together all factors of production within reach for a desired, anticipated and welcome end product.

Educationally, the Oxford Research Encyclopedia (2021) sees the concept as to effectively and efficiently create and maintain environments within educational institutions that promote, support, and sustain effective teaching and learning, but how those key objectives are set and how they are attained may differ significantly. As further stated by Kashyap, this could be achieved through the following systems of educational management:

- Centralized and decentralized educational management
- External and internal educational management
- Autocratic and democratic educational management
- Creative educational management

It is very pertinent to note at this point that no one educational management system can be best, but rather, the combination of the four types of educational management based on the prevailing circumstance of the schools, would be appropriate. Thus, principals' management refers to the procedures, styles, strategies, and instructional techniques which principals use to manage behavior and learning activities in the learning environment.

As Kassim and Abdullahi suggested, the dimensions to be taken by the principals to manage the learning environment could be to:

- Protect instructional time
- Maintain high visibility
- Provide incentives to teachers
- Promote professional development
- Provide incentives for the students, and
- Establish standards and provide expectations

Furthermore, the principals should be able to bring all the learning experiences from outside the classrooms and school environments to the students through education and other social technologies.

As the administrator of the secondary school, he or she must ensure that the society, immediate community, parents, and guidance must be brought into the education of the child through constant interactive fora. The principal should be able to draw programs to include the exposure of the children to educational and non-educational sites, centres and buildings. The management of the learning environment will not be complete without the school principals having to regularly follow up on the progress of both the teachers and students from in and outside the learning environment.

5. Implications for Quality Education in Post-Covid 19 Era

Education can never be achieved without a holistic approach, neither can an attempt be made to seek the meaning without one's perspective and views of what constitutes the concept. Consequently, education can never have a universally acceptable definition, in that, education means different things to different people and societies.

To the United Nations, as explained by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) No. 4, education is seen as inclusive, equal and, accessible to all. Education, therefore, is a process of harnessing all activities and resources that shape the lives and behavioural perceptions of the individual. However, the education of today that would meet the realities of contemporary society, Nigeria and Akwa Ibom State, in particular, must be qualitative enough to stand the test of time.

A quality education focuses on the whole child – the social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development of each student, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or geographic location. The author further stated that this kind of education provides resources and directs policy to ensure that each child enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle; learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults; is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community; has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults; and is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and employment and participation in a global environment. Regrettably, the education of the Nigerian child in

our secondary schools has not met all the parameters as stated by Slade that qualify education as being qualitative, how much more, with the emerging negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Corona Virus, also known as COVID-19 has brought more challenging issues all over the world, with Nigeria and Akwa Ibom State not being exceptions. The pandemic left students out of school for so many months, thereby causing a bridge in the academic calendar and curriculum attainment. This has also made students to become truants, increased their destructive behaviour and most importantly, forget what was previously taught in school. On the path of the teachers, the pandemic has led to dearth in knowledge and the inability to impact and transfer knowledge to the students.

The present education through the learning environment must be managed creatively and innovatively, to reposition the secondary school system for better pedagogy and within the environment that is best for all involved. Furthermore, principals should create more awareness for the staff and students on the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines. This would create confidence and an enabling academic environment. The principals, as a matter of urgency and importance, should create online classrooms and learning environment in order to minimize face-to-face contact. Arguably, with the creation of the online classrooms, the principals would have given the staff and students the enabling learning experience to increase learning without borders, as this would create competitive education in the new normal.

6. Conclusion

The improvement of the learning environment is not a 'one-man thing'. It involves all stakeholders in the secondary school project, not minding the realities of life and peculiarities of government. This paper has singled out the school principal or administrator for the pivotal role of the management of the learning environment, as his impact cannot be understated. Hence, it is the position of this paper that it is only when the school principal is innovative, creative and, proactive with the understanding of the learning environment, that the so desired qualitative education would be near-fetched. The journey begins even now in the post-COVID 19 pandemic era.

7. Recommendations

Based on our assertions, the following recommendations become imperative:

- The government of Nigeria should carry out a total overhauling of the education sector by declaring a state of emergency was done in the health sector as a result of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The international communities and organisations such as UNESCO, World Bank and African Development Bank should come to the aid of the education system in Nigeria, especially the secondary school subsector. This could be done through grants, donations and scientific innovations.

- The principals should look inwards for collaboration and joint ventures with all stakeholders in the secondary school project, with a view to improving the learning environment.

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