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THE POLICY AND PRACTICE OF PLACEMENT OF PUPILS IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS:
A PARADIGM FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Nations continue to strive to improve their education systems through various strategies and plans. Some of these are outcomes of research on various aspects of education; hence the need for continuous research on all aspects of education.

Based on this, the present study aims to assess how school administrators handle the issue of the placement of pupils in classes in Nigeria. The study, designed as a survey, used questionnaires and interviews to elicit responses from the sample. A total of 382 teachers, who participated in a workshop organised at the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration, constituted the sample. A contingency analysis, as well as a t-test, was used to analyse data.

Results showed that most schools adopted the random placement criterion, an observation that was not a chance phenomenon, but reflected the actual practice in the schools sampled (X2 computed = 520.76 > X2 table = 21.69, @ .05 level, 12df). Results also showed that older schools used this practice more than the relatively newer ones. A t-test showed that between the educationally advanced states of the south and the educationally backward states of the north, the practice was the same (F computed 1.3 < F critical 1.3 @ .05 level). The implication is that a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous class grouping is created that offers both low and high achievers the opportunity to interact and learn from one another, with the less academically bright pupils benefiting from the brighter ones. The implication of this and other appropriate recommendations are discussed to aid overall education success in Nigeria.

Keywords: pupil placement, educational success, educational planning and administration

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INTRODUCTION

Education is the bedrock of and the catalyst for any economy's growth and development. Governments appropriate huge sums of money in national budgets to education as a result and adopt strategies to attempt to ensure their education systems do not fail. Such strategies include, but are not limited to offering free basic education, free tuition at tertiary levels, boosting teacher welfare, research and evaluation and improving teaching effectiveness by adopting various teaching methods to even such issues as the placement of pupils in classes. Primary-level education is the foundation of all other subsystems in education. This recognition may explain numerous researchers and scholars' interest in this area, as it is one of the ways countries sometimes attempt to provide optimal circumstances for learning for all pupils. The placement of pupils in classes is an emerging area which, if handled well by administrators and planners, could contribute to overall educational success.

PLACEMENT OF PUPILS IN CLASSES

This paper explores an international as well as a Nigerian perspective on the subject of the placement of pupils in classes, taking the USA as a case study because of advanced policies in this area. In the USA, class placement is taken so seriously that policies exist for placing pupils. This, at times, involves parents who may even make specific requests either for specific teachers or classes due to various considerations. Generally, factors that are considered in class placement include total enrolment, students' ability levels, gender, special education needs, learners' languages and other considerations that may benefit all students or pupils.

Edina (2009) reported that when using a team approach, the head teacher addresses the following when placing students in instructional groups: heterogeneous groups (a mixture of academic abilities, talents and personalities), students with special needs (students who are disabled, physically handicapped or have emotional and/or behavioural challenges) and special information (as identified by the parents and/or guardians). Others include organisational options (students may be considered for options that may include self-contained or team teaching) and class size. In some instances, for example, at Stillwater Elementary School in the USA, placement displays variations of the above. The placement team tries to create a balance in classes, using the following criteria: classroom configuration (ratio of boys to girls), the programme needs of individuals, a balance of achievement levels, the social needs of students and their leadership skills. Other criteria are compatibility of students with one another

(such as separating students who have not worked well together in the past) and the recommendations of former teachers, head teachers, parents, the guidance team or related information from previous schools (Fierro, 2009).

Meeks (2009) adds that, in class placement, authorities should consider natural and man-made barriers, promote contiguous attendance boundaries (keeping neighbourhoods together), maximise the efficient use of space, staff and transportation resources, and strive for future placement stability, considering future population growth and development. Heumann (1994) argues that, with regard to the placement of a disabled child, authorities should consider special aids and facilities available in the class, such as appropriate teaching aids, specially designed walkways for the physically challenged who may need wheelchairs and the location of the class.

Underscoring the importance of careful placement of pupils in primary schools, especially twins, Wiki (2009) reported that twins and multiples are specially handled, arguing that experts recommend that, unless there is a compelling reason to separate twins or multiples, the benefit of keeping them together, especially at primary school level, outweighs the detriments. Furthermore, there is legal backing for twins not being separated in class. Some states in the USA have passed such laws or are in the process of passing them. For example, the Texas Twin Bill (80 R H.B. 314) was passed in Oklahoma and Illinois in 2007. Resolutions that have been passed date back as far as 1994. The State of New York introduced Senate Bill S. 2074 and State Assembly Bill on 21 August 2007. Other states that have passed such laws include the State of Pennsylvania (23 April 2007) and the State of Florida (June 2008). In addition, bills have been sponsored and introduced in New Jersey, Massachusetts, Alabama, Carolina, Georgia and Indiana (Fierro, 2004).

In addition to the matter of twins and multiples, there is also the issue of gifted children. Even the placement of a gifted child receives special consideration, granted that it is usually difficult to identify who is gifted and who would require a different type of school experience to succeed (Palmer, 2009). Overall class placement in the USA has received considerable legal and policy attention, which is not noticeable in Nigeria.

Nigeria has a well-articulated National Policy on Education (NPE), which specifies the philosophy, objectives and values derivable from education. It specifies these in broad terms and narrows them down to each type and level of education: pre-primary, primary and post-basic (secondary level and tertiary), stating clearly what each level should aim at achieving.

There is no doubt that every citizen desires and is also compelled to get some level of literacy. Hence the Federal Government has made education in the first nine years (six years at the primary level and the first three years at the junior secondary level) not only free, but also compulsory. The Nigerian education system at all levels recognises and emphasises the following positive educational values stated in the NPE (2004): respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, faith in man's ability to make rational decisions, and moral and spiritual principles in interpersonal and human relations. Other values include shared responsibility for the common good of society, the promotion of the physical, emotional and psychological development of all children, and the acquisition of competencies necessary for self-reliance. These values are defined in programmes of the primary education system because of the need to institute such values early in life as this level of education forms the bedrock of future levels of education. Unfortunately, there is no legislation yet from the National Primary Education Commission (NPEC), established by Decree 31 of 1988, or its successor, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), launched in 1999, on classroom placement, even though the NPEC (Adeboyeje, 2006) was established among others to prescribe minimum standards for primary education throughout the country to cater for the needs of the educationally disadvantaged states, and to establish Primary School Management Boards (PSMB) at the state and district levels throughout the country. The nearest the Commission got to legislation was the power statutorily given to the Local Government Education Authorities by Decree 3 of 1991, which, among others, was responsible for "full enrolment and attendance of pupils in all primary schools in its area of jurisdiction", without specifying how to place pupils so enrolled.

So, whatever value can be added to this level through research is a milestone in the right direction. Hence, this study deals with class placement in Nigerian primary schools. However, no policy exists in the NPE as to how pupils are to be placed in classes. There is, therefore, an assumption that the teacher knows how to place pupils or has the discretion to do so. There is no such policy at state or even local government level, hence the need to determine the policy and practice in Nigerian primary schools. Determining this has critical implications for educational success. This is why this study is about finding out what has been happening in the field, with a view to providing appropriate advice on how to streamline them.

Previous studies have addressed areas such as class enrolment, dropout, transition or how to group pupils in large primary school science classes (Ikitde, 2007). But, preceding these, is the issue of how pupils should be placed in classes. What criteria are used in Nigeria to place primary school pupils to enable them to derive the maximum benefits enunciated in the national objectives? Since no policy or legislation exists, determining this through this study is likely to have implications for contributing to educational success in Nigeria.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

If, by the present review, it is shown that class placement is as important to teachers as it is to parents and government, the study would have been of immense value in reawakening policy-makers' interest in this area even more so, considering that advanced countries have already passed legislation guiding class placement.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was a survey. Questionnaires and oral interviews were the instruments for data collection. The sample consisted of 382 head teachers, who were involved in a skills improvement workshop for primary school teachers in the country. The questionnaire was given to them as part of the registration formalities. Only a selected few of this number were interviewed in a panel of 10.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using contingency analysis to test if the frequency of occurrence of the responses was by chance or whether there was a relationship with the actual observation in the field.

A t-test was also used to test the difference between the responses from the "educationally advanced states" and the "educationally backward states" – the former used to refer to states in the southern and the latter to states in the northern part of the country.

The qualitative data arising from the interview was used to enrich the observations from the questionnaire, as they were not subjected to a statistical analysis.

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

Data collected using the questionnaire was analysed using Table 1.

Table 1: Placement criteria by age of institution

Placement criteria / Age of school	Homoge-neous (by academic performance)	Discipline	Sex	Alphabeti-cal (by surname)	Random*	Total
Under 10 years	(4.71) 18	(1.5) 6	(0.7) 3	(0.26) 1	(13.61) 52	(20.94) 80
10 years and more, but less than 20 years	(3.93) 15	(3.14) 12	(1.05) 4	(1.3) 5	(12.56) 48	(21.99) 84
20 years and more, but less than 30 years	(3.93) 15	(2.36) 9	(1.05) 4	(1.5) 6	(17.27) 66	(26.18) 100
30 years and more	(3.14) 12	(2.36) 9	(0.26) 1	(1.5) 6	(23.56) 90	(30.89) 118
Total	(15.71) 60	(9.43) 36	(3.14) 12	(4.71) 18	(67.01) 256	(100) 382

*P < .05
Figures in parenthesis in Table 1 are percentages.

Table 1 shows data on how respondents addressed the issue of class placement in their respective schools. The table showed that of the 382 respondents, 15.71% (N = 60) place pupils by academic performance criteria. That is to say, the most brilliant group are identified and placed in an "A" class, while the less brilliant are placed in the "B" class and so on. Some 9.43% (N = 36) adopt placement by "discipline", while 3.14% (N = 12) use "sex" as a criterion. In addition, 4.71% (N = 18) specified "alphabetically by surname", while 67.01% place pupils according to the "random" criterion. The latter indicates that as pupils arrive in a class from registration, they are just assigned to a class, irrespective of their academic ability, sex, surname or discipline.

In addition, the study was interested in establishing the influence of the age of the school on the variable – class placement. Data revealed that 20.94% of the schools were under 10 years old, 21.99% between 10 and 20, while 20.18% were between 20 and 30 years old, and 30.89% had been in existence for over 30 years. Results showed that most of the schools, irrespective of age, adopted the "random" criterion for placement more than any other criterion (13.61%, 12.56%, 17.27%, 23.56% and 67.01%). The study attempted to find out if this observation occurred by chance or had any significant relationship with the reality in the field. Table 2 explains this.

Table 2: Contingency table on placement criteria by age

Placement criteria / Age of school	Homoge-neous (by academic performance)	Discipline	Sex	Alphabeti-cal (by surname)	Random*	Total
Under 10 years	(4.71) A 18 12.6	(1.5) B 6 7.5	(0.7) C 3 2.5	(0.26) D 1 3.8	(13.61) E 52 53.6	(20.94) 80
10 years and more, but less than 20 years	(3.93) F 15 13.2	(3.14) G 12 7.9	(1.05) H 4 2.6	(1.3) I 5 3.9	(12.56) J 48 56.3	(21.99) 84
20 years and more, but less than 30 years	(3.93) K 15 1	(2.36) L 9 9.4	(1.05) M 4 31.6	(1.5) N 6 4.7	(17.27) O 66 6.7	(26.18) 100
30 years and more	(3.14) P 12 18.5	(2.36) Q 9 11.1	(0.26) R 1 3.7	(1.5) S 6 5.6	(23.56) T 90 79.0	(30.89) 118
Total	(15.71) 60	(9.43) 36	(3.14) 12	(4.71) 18	(67.01) 256	(100) 382

*P < .05 $X^2c = 520.76 > X^2t = 21.69$, .05, 12 df

NB – Figures to the right in the cell in parenthesis are percentages.

Figures down the left in the cell are the contingency observation scores of each cell.

Figures in the middle (centre) are frequencies.

A, B, C … T are cell identifiers.

CELLS	O	E	$\Sigma \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$
A	12.6	20.56	3.08
B	7.5	20.56	8.3
C	2.5	20.56	15.85
D	3.8	20.56	13.66
E	53.6	20.56	53.09
F	13.2	20.56	2.63
G	7.9	20.56	7.79
H	2.6	20.56	15.68
I	3.9	20.56	13.50

CELLS	O	E	$\frac{\Sigma (O - E)2}{E}$
J	56.3	20.56	62.12
K	15.7	20.56	1.15
L	9.4	20.56	6.05
M	31.6	20.56	5.30
N	4.7	20.56	12.23
O	67.0	20.56	104.89
P	18.5	20.56	0.20
Q	11.1	20.56	4.35
R	3.7	20.56	13.82
S	5.6	20.56	10.88
T	79.0	20.56	166.11
Σ	411.2		520.76

$$\Sigma \left[\frac{O}{n} = \right] E = \frac{411.2}{20} = 20.56$$

$X^2_c = 520.76 > X^2_t$ @ 12 df at .05 level

Table 2 shows the contingency table derived from the data in Table 1. Each of the 20 cells (A to T) has the "observed" data at the bottom left, while the data in parenthesis are percentages. The figure in the middle of each cell is the obtained frequency of responses. Following the calculations of the Chi-square statistic, using the formula $\Sigma \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$ X^2 of 520.76 was yielded. Compared with the table (critical) X2, which is 21.69, at 12 df at .05 level of significance, it was confirmed that the observations were not by chance and represent an actual relationship with what was obtained in the field. Therefore, most schools across the 25 states from which the sample was drawn adopted the random criterion in the placement of pupils in primary schools in Nigeria. This observation further confirmed the results of Table 2 regarding the differences between the educationally backward and educationally advanced states. These are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: The differences between the educationally backward states (EBS) and the educationally advanced states (EAS)

Criteria	N	X	SD	t	F
EAS	194	48.75	10.4	3.66	1.3
EBS	182	46.25	13.04		

F 193,181 F computed = 1.3 < F critical = 1.39 @ .05 level

Table 3 presents data testing if there was any observed difference in the respondents from educationally advanced states and educationally backward states. Since the table value (F = 1.39) is greater than the computed F value (1.3 at 0.5 level), the variances between the educationally advanced states and the educationally backward states do not differ, but are homogeneous, confirming that there was no difference in the observations of the educationally advanced states and the educationally backward states, as both made use of random placement as the major criterion.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study were that most Nigerian primary schools adopted the random criterion in the placement of pupils in primary schools. This means that pupils are placed in classes as they arrive, without much regard to criteria such as sex, alphabetically by surname and discipline. The next most adopted criterion is by academic performance – where pupils are grouped according to the best academic performers in the A class, the next best in the B class and so on, otherwise referred to as tracking. The primary schools in the educationally backward states of the north essentially adopted the same criteria as the schools in the educationally advanced states of the south, that is, by random selection and academic performance.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings were consistent with the observations of the focus group who remarked that "if you don't place by random, you will not be encouraging slow learners to rub off on the experiences of the brighter students who otherwise could have been caged into an A class, making learning experiences lopsided". Another frequent remark was that such random placement afforded pupils the opportunity of sharing the experiences of people from different home backgrounds, ensuring equity in teaching and learning as teachers might wish to water down learning

in an academically inferior B class. These two critical remarks summarised the observations of the focus group discussions.

Overall, the data – as presented in Table 1 to Table 3 – showed that the random criterion that automatically creates heterogeneous rather than homogeneous classes was used most. Research evidence abounds, confirming that such heterogeneous groupings – as compared to homogeneous ones – offer better educational learning experiences, even though Anderson (2004) observed that comparing student achievement in homogeneous and heterogeneous classes is not as obvious as it appears at first glance, arguing that the disparity is more likely in the ways in which students with a low or a high ability are treated when placed in a homogeneous class rather than a heterogeneous class, than it is in relation to group membership per se. Hallinan in Anderson (2004) concluded that students with a lower ability in homogeneous classes tended to receive instruction at a slower pace, their teachers had more time off-task for administrative or managerial reasons and the pupils were often taught using material that was less interesting than that used to teach similar students in heterogeneous classes.

Osaki and Agu (2002), studying classroom interaction in primary schools, found that while segregating pupils on the basis of intelligence (tracking), when the boys and girls sat together, the girls in three rural schools in the districts of Musoma, Kisarawe and Zanzibar complained that sitting close to the boys led to their being harassed, but there was no such harassment in the urban schools where the boys and girls sat together. This is another reason why class placement is an issue.

The study has confirmed that most schools adopted academic performance (tracking) as a criterion for placement. It also showed that such a criterion created homogeneous classes, while random placement creates heterogeneous classes. The implication is that the placement of pupils by academic performance denied average pupils the opportunity of mixing with the bright pupils. Such interaction could have impacted positively on the average pupils. This system also reminded pupils so "tracked" in the B class that they were inferior to those in the A class and, as such, were likely to be affected emotionally, leading to some negative behaviour, such as being withdrawn, vexatious or delinquent. This may not be the best for low achievers or for equity, for the latter presupposes that the teacher of the B class may have a mental picture of the class being inferior and, as such, may tailor his or her teaching to suit the class. Rather than motivating such pupils, the teacher might perceive the low quality teaching and watering down of the content to be a factor of their perceived underachievement.

Even in terms of teacher quality and availability, the school management may be unconsciously conditioned to have fewer quality teachers posted to the B class on the presumption that the school was dependent on the A class for the quality of the school's academic performance. In a case of paucity of teachers in a stream, the A class got the needed attention rather than the B or C class and so on.

But does tracking make a positive contribution to universal basic education? Does it promote education for all? Probably not. Universal basic education is interested in promoting education for all, whereas the academic performance (tracking) criterion promotes education for a homogeneous group of learners: the so-called academically bright ones. Using the random criterion, on the other hand, offers every pupil an equal chance of being either in the A or the B class. As such, both the academically bright and the less academically bright or the low achievers are mixed up in a class to share experiences.

The apparently low achievers may, within some years, begin to perform better and, as such, promote healthy competition among the pupils.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has policy implications for school administrators, as well as planners and teachers, especially with regard to the advantages of heterogeneous versus homogeneous class groupings. Based on the above, the following recommendations are made:

- School administrators are encouraged to adopt the random criterion in class placement and reap the benefits of such heterogeneous class groupings.
- Planners are to ensure that this policy of classroom placement is reflected in the curriculum of teacher trainees so they know the benefits of creating heterogeneous classes through random placement.
- Following this, teachers who are the direct line managers in the system should recognise that a heterogeneous class grouping demands special recognition in classroom management, especially as it relates to the question of distribution and class control.
- A careful adoption of this policy increases the internal efficiency of the educational system, which means increasing the capacity to turn out its graduates maximally, thereby reducing educational wastage that results from repetitions, failures and dropouts/early leavers.

Legislation should be considered, as in the USA, to guide the policy of class placement, such as who takes final action, how to handle twins, the disabled and the physically challenged, etc., while adopting the random criterion for class placement.

CONCLUSION

The overall findings offer a number of explanations regarding how pupils should be placed in classes, recommending the random criterion as the most appropriate in a normal school setting devoid of pupils with special educational needs, especially handicapped or gifted pupils at the other extreme. In conclusion, the Nigerian experience that favours heterogeneity through the random criterion, though not legalised, offers a good opportunity for low achievers to obtain equity, teacher quality and availability, and by extension, will contribute to the overall success of universal basic education, hence its adoption is recommended as standard policy in Nigeria.

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