

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 study 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 study also explained who the principal is and his responsibilities concerning the educational managerial conception.

The study 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 desired quality education can be achieved.

Keywords: Improved quality education, Learning environment, Post Covid.

Introduction

No education can rise above the learning environment. Therefore, the intention 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 is important. The learning environment has often been relegated and most times misconstrued to be in the four walls of the classroom, but in practice, this assumption is usually not tenable.

The learning environment is an all-encompassing concept that means an educational realm or scholastic world does not begin and end with teaching and learning only. 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.

Regrettably, the inability of the major stakeholders in the secondary school project to understand, the meaning, nature and aspects of the learning environment, has 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.

Observations from several years of interactions and visits to secondary schools, private and public and 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 favorably with their peers from other parts of the world.

The negative influence of the classrooms on students' academic performance, in general, has been a concern to all partners in the educational arena⁹. Umar⁹ 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 study was 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.

Learning Environment- What and What Not

The learning environment is neither the school environment and classrooms alone, nor is 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.

Environment is not limited to schools, it includes the home, religious enclaves, the society, peer groups, recreational centers, market places, hospitals, motor parks and any other place that the learners come in contact throughout the learning stages within a particular academic level. 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.

In another development, it will be disastrous to conclude that the learning environment of today is limited to only the physical surrounding. It is more than the structures, it is now about the invisible interactions and relationships within the global space. 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.

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 Education¹ outlines four components of learning environment to include:

- Safety
- Engagement
- Connectedness, and
- Support

It is against this backdrop that Movchan⁵ 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.

Safety means that students must feel safe, both physically and mentally. They must be respected, supported and should feel happy. Engagement, on the other hand, means that there must be personalized learning, where the student-centered 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 achieved through social and emotional learning. Supportive means that the learning environment must provide a relationship between the teachers, classmates, administrators, family, community and its members.

As Movchan⁵ 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 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.

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 Roberts⁷, 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 Encyclopedia⁶ 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 Kashyap³, 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 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 environment².

As Kassim and Abdullahi⁴ 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. The Principal should be able to draw programs to include the exposure of the children to educational and non-educational sites, centers 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 of the learning environment.

Implications for Quality Education in Post-Covid 19 Era

Education can never be achieved without a holistic approach. Consequently, education can never have a universally acceptable definition, in that, education means different 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 behavioral 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.

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 location⁸. Slade⁸ 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 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 present education through the learning environment must be managed creatively and innovatively for better pedagogy and within the environment that is best for all involved.

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 study has singled out the school principal or administrator for the pivotal role of the management of the learning environment, as his impact cannot be under-estimated. The journey begins now in the post-COVID 19 pandemic era.

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