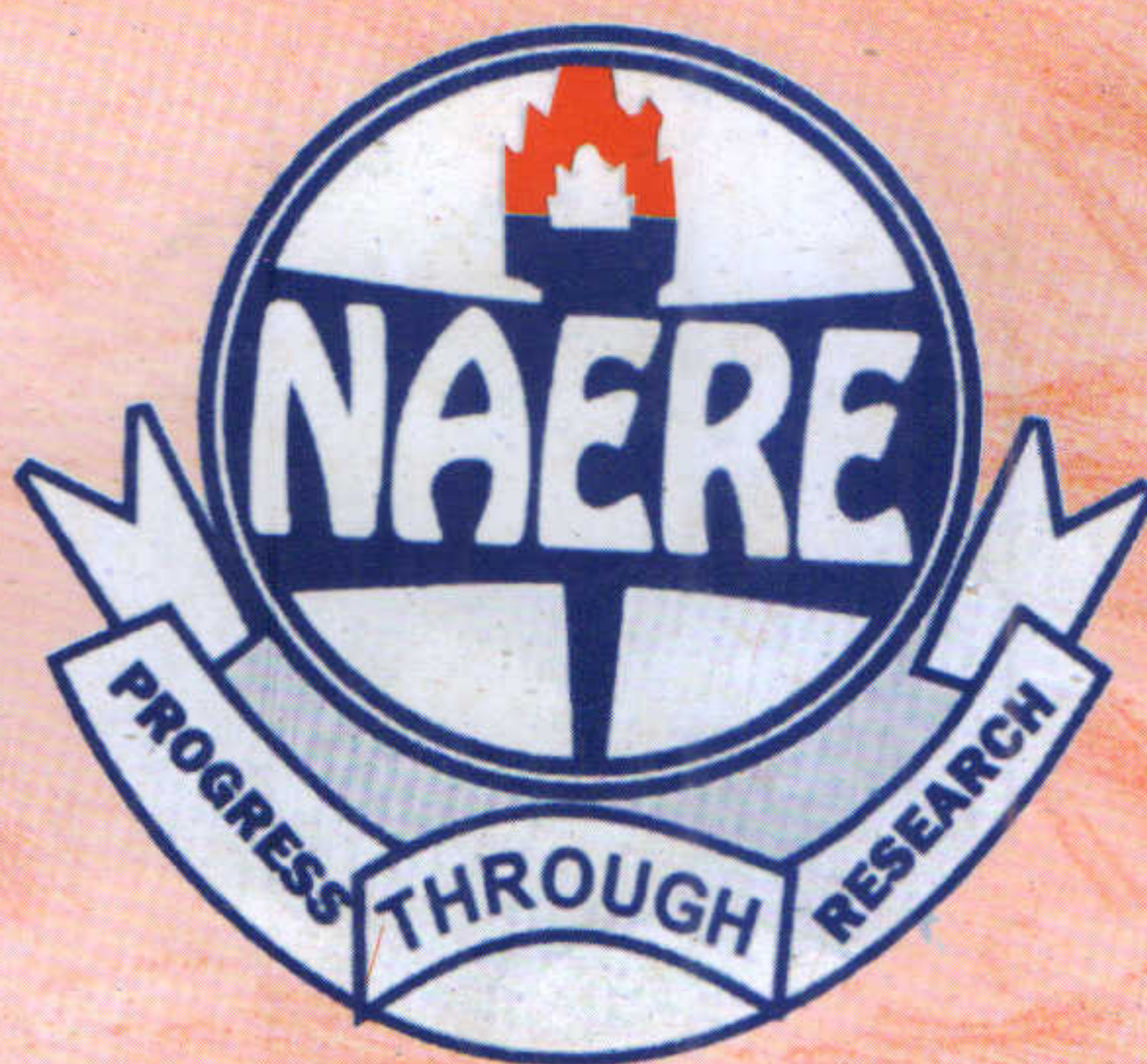


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RE-CONCEPTUALIZATION OF EDUCATION BENCHMARKS AND STANDARDS: THE STARTING POINT FOR SCHOOL REFORM

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined education standard for defining what all students should know and be able to do to live and work in the 21st century. The absence of clearly defined skills expected at every stage and level of education which will guide what all students should learn in school was identified. A need to re-conceptualize goals of minimum standard by all stakeholders in education was identified as the major starting point for reform. It was reasoned that this will enable the country to meaningfully harness human capital development resources through the school system and produce citizens who are able to participate successfully in the global, technology-driven economy for the country. Two types of standard were discussed as the foundation of standard-based reform: content standards and performance standards. Paradigm shift from "access for all" to "high quality learning for all" in the educational system was also canvassed. Standard-based reform seeks to establish clear attainable standard at internationally competitive levels for the entire student population. An evaluation system that supports achieving the learning standards in a culturally diverse school system as enunciated in the NPE 2004 for Nigeria was proposed. The role of educational evaluators in setting and ensuring compliance to benchmarks and standards were also spelt out. The paper concluded by suggesting that evaluators in Nigeria should constitute a council or bureau of benchmarks and standards which will coordinate with the Federal Ministry of Education and other agencies operating in the system.

Introduction

The importance and linkage of education to the development of any society is well known. It is in recognition of this importance that the government and international community are concerned about the quality and standard of education in the country since the nation's overall development is inextricably tied to the educational system. Over the years, Nigeria has expressed a commitment to

education, in the belief that overcoming illiteracy and ignorance will form a basis for accelerated national development. However, regardless of the incontrovertible evidence that education is crucial to the development of the community and the nation, there is a general norms about the falling standard and quality of education outputs. Scholars and researchers have pointed to the declining performance of graduates from the educational system relative to what obtained in the past especially in terms of reading, writing and practical skills (Obasi, 1980; Enworom, 1994; Adeyemi, 2005; Ogum, 2007).

Some of the reasons adduced for this state of affairs include the declining competence and commitment of teachers, inadequate provision of facilities; non-maintenance of availability facilities, outdated and largely irrelevant curricula; parents nonchalance to children's schoolwork/activities, lack of interest and seriousness on the part of students which lead to examination malpractice; the cankerworm of the "get-rich-quick" syndrome of the Nigerian youths of today; and the lost glories of traditional education which flourished on the appropriate acquisition and utilization of skills.

The private sector has become involved in providing placement in education at all levels in Nigeria, with government holding regulatory powers. If is meant to provide healthy competition of schools. But they are no much better since they also operate under the vagaries of the Nigerian circumstance where so much is done on paper but very little done at implementation. Consequently, the issue of academic excellence continues to elude majority of school leavers in Nigeria (Adeyegbe, 2002; Anya, 2003; Onipede, 2003; Duze, 2004; Ogum, 2007).

It is disquieting to note that when it comes to implementing the variables or factors that yield quality education, Nigeria tends to drag its feet, yet the goals of education enshrined in her National Policy on Education (2004), point to quality education via the appropriate acquisition of knowledge and skills at all levels. Besides, Nigeria participated in the famous "Education For All" (EFA) by the year 2000 often referred to as Jomtien Conference held in March 1990. Unequivocally, EFA emphasizes education of good quality for life-long living through a major strategy of practical skill acquisition. At the April 2000 EFA Forum in Dakar, Nigeria together with other countries moved the EFA target year from 2000 to 2015.

Moreover, Nigeria as one of the signatory countries in United Nations was compelled to implement the UNESCO mandate to provide high standard and good quality primary education for every child. Presently, there is a strong imperative to re-conceptualized the education standard that school students will need to thrive in a high standards environment. Hence, this paper examined the need for all education stakeholders to re-conceptualize d the education standard as the starting point for defining what all students should know and be able to do to live and in the 21st century.

The appropriate development of every child has been driven by the need to define the skills expected at every stage and level of education which will dictate what

shapes (e.g. parallelograms, triangles, circles)

Performance Standards: spell out what students must demonstrate to be considered proficient in the subject matter defined in the content standards. They describe various levels of performance (a rubric). For example, a commonly used rubric in standard based assessment systems defines student performance according to four levels: Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Novice. Below are examples of generic performance scales for benchmarks that focus on what Marzano and Kendall (1996) distinguish as "declarative knowledge" involving information, concepts, and relationships and "procedural knowledge" involving the use of specific skills, strategies and process.

General scale for Performance on a Declarative Benchmark

General scale for Performance on a Declarative Benchmark

4	Advanced Performance: Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the important information; is able to exemplify that information in detail and articulate complex relationship and distinctions
3	Proficient Performance: Demonstrates an understanding of the important information; is able to exemplify that information in some detail
2	Basic Performance: Demonstrates an incomplete understanding of the important information, but does not have severe misconceptions
1	Novice Performance: Demonstrates an incomplete understanding of the important information along with severe misconceptions

General scale for Performance on a Procedural Benchmark

4	Advanced Performance: Carries out the major processes/skills inherent in the procedure with relative ease and automaticity
3	Proficient Performance: Carries out the major processes/skills inherent in the procedure without significant error, but not necessarily at a automatic level
2	Basic Performance: Makes a number of errors when carrying out the processes and skills important to the procedure, but still accomplishes the basic purpose of the procedure
1	Novice Performance: Makes so many errors when carrying out the process and skills important to the procedure that it fails to accomplish its purpose.

Content and performance standards create a concrete vision of academic success for all students, and are the foundation for other pieces of education reform: performance assessments, challenging curricula, educational resources, and professional development. Thus, there are several ways that content and performance standards can be used by state education agencies and examination bodies to design statewide assessment systems based on clearly defined standards of learning for all students, by teachers to organize curriculum and instruction, by textbook publishers to develop educational resources for schools, and in teacher pre-service and in-service programs to prepare teachers in what they are expected to teach.

What Standard-Based Learning Means for Schools

Standard-based learning presents significant challenges to schools. Schools must ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve at high levels and embrace the belief that the dramatic differences in student performance are the result of conditions unrelated to students' capacity to learn. This shift represents a very different mission for schools and a new emphasis on accountability for the success of all students. Standards-based learning means that the curriculum for all students is based on the same expectations for what students should know and be able to do. Assessment is integrated with instruction, subject matter is organized around real world tasks, and the pace of instruction is based on student progress rather than much content has to be covered. There is an emphasis on results and accountability, less use of textbook "end-of-unit" tests and norm-referenced measures, and increased use of alternative assessments that offer varied ways for students to demonstrate their understandings and skills. The overall emphasis on higher order reasoning and problem solving skills in the standards movement means that the learning process focuses attention on how students think and what they understand, not just whether they get the right answers. Instead of basing instruction on the amount of time needed to cover topics, more flexibility is allowed so that students can develop essential knowledge and skills over extended periods of time. Students demonstrate what they know and can do through performing on-demand tasks, preparing long-term projects, or assembling portfolios that contain a collection of their work produced over time.

Standard-based learning requires new roles and skills for classroom teachers. Implementing new standard-based curriculum frameworks will take considerable professional development for teachers must be carefully integrated into each stage of a school's plan to implement high quality learning with culturally diverse student populations. Translating the mission of "high quality learning for all" into reality requires policies and practices that provide clear direction and guidance for instruction and assessment. School policies communicate the school's beliefs about the quality of education that should be offered to all students; they also send strong messages about the school's commitment to ensuring fairness and equity in instructional practice.

Role of Educational Evaluators in setting and ensuring compliance to benchmarks and standards

These are presented below:

- ✍ Having an evaluation system that supports achieving the learning standards in a culturally diverse school system as we have in the country and enunciated in the National Policy on Education (2004).
- ✍ Ensuring that the curriculum for all students is based on the same standards for what students should know and be able to do.
- ✍ Preparing assessment techniques that will provide all students with high quality learning and having the opportunities to develop higher order proficiencies.
- ✍ Provide opportunities for multiple assessment measures that offer a variety of ways for students to demonstrate what they know and can do.
- ✍ Provide and uses assessments and scoring rubrics that are free of cultural bias.
- ✍ Uses clearly defined criteria to determine the appropriateness of assessments for students.
- ✍ Provision and ensuring the appropriate interpretation and use of student assessment results to improve instruction and student learning.
- ✍ Urge educators and the public to realize that instead of comparing students to each other, we should think of student progress in relation to the standards themselves.

Conclusion

Education benchmarking and standard represents the approach to helping communities chart a course that keeps school reform both educationally rigorous and institutionally realistic. By trying performance measures to the process and expected results of program implementation at each stage along the way, benchmarking offers the hope of pursuing an ambitious vision by means of concrete, realizable steps for which all participants are held accountable. More than anything else, education benchmarks and standards will help schools and their allies to take control of the reform process and their educational destiny. The accountability inherent in this process of goal-setting and measurement provides a lever to use against the resistance of the status quo. In the future, educators at all levels will need to justify their professional judgements to themselves, their superiors, and the public on the basis of measurable goals and results they can stand by. Through education benchmark and standards, sharply-defined objectives and relevant data can become both their defense and, ultimately, their beacon, lighting the way toward educational renewal.

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