

## ADDRESSING ISSUES IN THE STATE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A DEWEY'S APPROACH

**Dr. SHINA O. OLAYIWOLA**

Department of Educational Management

Obafemi Awolowo University

Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

E-Mail: [shinaoau@yahoo.com](mailto:shinaoau@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

*This paper examined secondary education in Nigeria, focusing on its two broad goals: preparation for useful living in society and preparation for higher education. Echoing John Dewey's observations on the educational situation in the United States, this paper analyzed secondary schooling in Nigeria and noted the relatively successful realization of the first goal (preparation for higher education) but a lack of adequate realization of the second (useful living in society). From a post-positivist perspective, it is argued that to fully attain the second goal, the secondary schooling system should incorporate the integration of specialization and selection frameworks as the philosophical direction for secondary education policy in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Academic, Performance, Secondary, Selection, Specialization, Streaming

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### Introduction

Philosophy of education, as a normative discipline, aims to prescribe a viable logical approach to studying educational situations to achieve educational goals. This paper examines the past and present state of secondary education in Nigeria, using John Dewey's analytical framework. For example, Lawal (2024) reported that the proposed National Senior Secondary School Education Commission (NSSSEC) Bill, 2023, decried the deplorable state of secondary education in Nigeria and called for collaboration to overcome challenges facing the sub-sector. Specifically, she stated that "the Commission listed some of the challenges confronting the sector to include infrastructural deficit, unqualified teachers, obsolete curriculum, and deplorable libraries and laboratories" (Lawal, 2024, p. 26).

In 1901, John Dewey, a progressive advocate for educational reforms, examined the educational situation in the United States and observed that the problem of high school (secondary school) related to preparation for college on the one hand and preparation for life on the other. This observation aligns directly with the broad goals of secondary education in Nigeria: to prepare individuals for useful living within society and for higher education. Like Dewey, this paper, focusing on the state of secondary education in Nigeria, argues that the prevailing philosophical orientation in Nigeria's public secondary school system shows a relatively successful realization of the goal of preparing students for higher education but a lack of adequate realization of the second goal—preparing students for useful living in society. From a post-positivist perspective, this paper argues that to fully achieve the second goal, the secondary schooling system should incorporate the integration of specialization and selection frameworks as the philosophical direction for secondary education policy in Nigeria. This suggests

education that addresses the practical needs of life and full participation of learners in activities based on the needs of the local society or community.

## **Secondary Education**

Secondary education is a critical stage in a learner's life, representing the education received during adolescence. Adolescence is an important period, particularly in providing a training ground for adulthood. Nigeria places a high value on secondary education, which occupies a central position in the government's policy documents. The two broad goals of secondary education in Nigeria are "to prepare the individual for the world of work, wealth creation and entrepreneurship; and tertiary level of education" (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2014, p. 17). Secondary education in Nigeria is similar to the high school system in countries like the United States of America (USA) and Canada. In this context, Dewey's (2002) observation on the problems of high school in the USA, "having to do with preparation for college on one side, and for life on the other" (p. 111), appears relevant to the context of secondary education goals in Nigeria. The specific objectives of secondary education in Nigeria are to:

- i. provide holders of the Basic Education Certificate and Junior Arabic and Islamic Studies Certificate with opportunity for education of a higher level irrespective of gender, social status, religious or ethnic background;
- ii. offer diversified curriculum to cater for the differences in talents, dispositions, opportunities and future roles;
- iii. provide trained manpower in the applied science, technology and commerce at sub-professional grades;
- iv. provide entrepreneurial, technical and vocational job-specific skills for self-reliance, and for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development;
- v. develop and promote Nigerian languages, art and culture in the context of world's cultural heritage;
- vi. inspire students with a desire for self-improvement and achievement of excellence;
- vii. foster patriotism, national unity and security education with emphasis on the common ties in spite of our diversity; and
- viii. raise morally upright and well-adjusted individuals who can think independently and rationally, respect the views and feelings of others and appreciate the dignity of labour (FRN, 2004, pp. 17 – 18).

To achieve these specific objectives, the education policy stipulates that secondary education shall be six years in duration, delivered in two stages: a junior secondary school stage and a senior secondary school stage, each lasting three years (FRN, 2014). The first stage is part of basic education, while the second stage is post-basic education. In 2004, Nigeria enacted the Universal Basic Education Act, leading to a slight modification of the secondary education system. The first stage of secondary education was combined with primary or elementary education to form a nine-year continuous basic education program. The second stage, senior secondary school, remained a three-year program. This modification has been implemented since 2005.

## Prevailing Situations of Secondary Education in Nigeria

This paper examines the state of secondary education in Nigeria between 2016 and 2018, as measured by students' academic performance in West African Examinations Council (WAEC) external examinations. The central question is: How far has Nigeria progressed in achieving its secondary education goals between 2016 and 2018, based on students' academic performance in these examinations? This paper focuses specifically on the goal of preparing individuals "proceeding to the tertiary level" (FRN, 2014, p. 17), as this goal appears specific, definite, and measurable. Dewey's (2002) question, "Is the high-school course to be planned primarily with reference to meeting the needs of those who go to college, on the assumption that this will also serve the best needs of those who go into other callings in life?" (p. 111), provides a suitable rationale for analyzing this particular goal. In this paper, this goal is assessed by students' academic performance in external examinations, as presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

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**Table 1: Performance in WAEC for 2016**

Zones	Total Enrolment		5 Credits Pass		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
South East	94819	108225	62247	70833	65.3	65.5
North East	74495	57221	26393	17524	29.2	32.0
South South	145394	148038	93285	97346	70.5	71.8
North Central	151806	122364	71198	59818	49.9	47.0
South West	190452	200799	101762	109463	44.0	44.8
North West	168493	95629	57492	40410	22.1	25.2

**Source:** National Bureau of Statistics (2019)

**Table 2: Performance in WAEC for 2017**

Zones	Total Enrolment		5 Credits Pass		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
South East	95485	108398	70273	80635	73.8	75.8
North East	89730	52089	30280	20237	31.9	38.7
South South	141207	146224	97157	103855	75.4	76.8
North Central	153635	124513	76390	64351	54.8	52.4
South West	190329	203439	108103	118379	51.0	50.7
North West	165884	94266	65275	46075	33.7	40.0

**Source:** National Bureau of Statistics (2019)

**Table 3: Performance in WAEC for 2018**

Zones	Total Enrolment		5 Credits Pass		Percentage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
South East	95161	108704	64087	72896	68.3	69.4
North East	81369	50557	16393	12276	13.2	21.4
South South	141308	148800	84092	92634	66.7	68.9
North Central	146251	125580	55097	49781	42.0	40.4
South West	199288	214457	102727	114011	41.7	43.3
North West	149047	93295	46848	36412	32.5	26.9

**Source:** National Bureau of Statistics (2019)

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present academic performance data, disaggregated by gender, for the WAEC examinations in 2016, 2017, and 2018, across Nigeria's six geo-political zones.

The data indicate that the North East and North West regions are low-performing in terms of WAEC standards.

The state of secondary education in Nigeria reveals poor performance by students in external examinations. This persistent poor academic performance has been a source of concern for educational planners, managers, and policymakers. For example, in October 2010, the Federal Ministry of Education organized an education summit to deliberate on issues related to the implementation and practice of education policies. During the summit's assessment of the secondary school system, the Minister of Education asserted that the recurring poor performance of students in external or public examinations indicates a systemic failure in the country (Ndeokwelu, 2010). The President of Nigeria also confirmed that the current "system of education has failed to address the challenges besetting the sector [secondary school] and [has] not equipped Nigerians with the necessary skills..." (FRN, 2010, p. 1).

More recently, in September 2011, the Minister of Education met with unit heads within the ministry and disclosed that "the major challenge of the sector [secondary school] was the poor performance of students in external examinations" (FRN, 2011, p. 5). To further this discussion, a stakeholders' workshop on education sector plans was held in October 2011. According to the Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Education, "the meeting was called to tackle the dwindling standard of education and the abysmal performance of senior secondary school students in examinations, which indicated deficiencies in the education system" (FRN, 2011, p. 4).

### **Framework for Secondary Education: Historical Analysis**

The historical background of secondary education in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period. Formal Western education began around September 1842 with the activities of Christian missionaries at the elementary level, primarily to spread Christianity. It was not until June 1859 that the Church Missionary Society (CMS) attempted to establish the CMS Grammar School in Lagos. In 1909, the colonial government complemented these efforts by establishing King's College, Lagos, a government-owned secondary school. During this period, the policy of restricting Christian missionary activities in the North while allowing them in the South created an educational imbalance between the regions and contributed to inter-regional tensions.

Currently, the history of secondary education in Nigeria reflects the involvement of missionaries, colonial and post-colonial governments, private individuals, and groups in establishing and managing secondary schools. Secondary education is generally categorized into grammar, comprehensive, high, vocational, technical, and commercial schools.

Dewey (1969) examined the educational situation in elementary, secondary, and higher education in the United States at the turn of the 19th century. Davis (2002) and Waks (2002) reflected on Dewey's analysis in the context of the contemporary educational situation. Davis (2002) noted that "Dewey insisted that the educational situation was the interaction for the educational purposes of individuals and materials in particular environments" (p. 2). Such interaction necessitates societal changes and has implications for schooling. For example, in Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (NPE) serves as the policy framework for using education as a tool to achieve societal

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goals. This document has been reviewed six times (1977, 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007, and 2014) to accommodate the changing nature of society and its implications for education and schooling.

Dewey's (2002) observation on the problems of high school, "having to do with preparation for college on one side, and for life on the other" (p. 111), remains relevant to the issues confronting secondary education in Nigeria. Specifically, the broad goals of secondary education in Nigeria are "to prepare the individual for the world of work, wealth creation and entrepreneurship; and tertiary level of education" (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2014, p. 17). Observations suggest that public examination results are often the primary measure of success in achieving secondary education goals in Nigeria. But what about preparation for useful living in society? The determinant of this goal appears unspecific. This assumption aligns with Dewey's (2002) view: "Is the high-school course to be planned primarily with reference to meeting the needs of those who go to college, on the assumption that this will also serve the best needs of those who go into other callings in life?" (p. 111).

Waks (2002) compared the educational situation in the United States between 1901 and 2001 and noted "the impact of organizational and administrative categories on curriculum content" (p. 102). Waks also observed that schools in the United States maintained the same organizational and administrative structures between 1901 and 2001. The goals of education in Nigeria are highly influenced by American progressive education, as noted by Dewey.

### **Secondary Education in Nigeria: A Post-positivist Perspective**

This paper analyzes secondary education in Nigeria from a post-positivist perspective. A positivist orientation in secondary education policy assumes that reality exists "out there" and is observable, stable, and measurable. Knowledge gained through studying this reality is labeled "scientific" and includes the establishment of "laws." The rigidity of the positivist stance has given way to logical empiricism and post-positivism. Post-positivism recognizes that knowledge is relative rather than absolute. Post-positivists are critical realists who believe in an objective reality, but acknowledge the existence of multiple truths.

The argument is that the idea of a value-free, neutral, objective, positivist science has been replaced by a post-positivist, critical realist view of science, characterized by conjecture (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The basis is that facts and observations are theory-laden and value-laden. In other words, facts and theories are fallible, different theories may support specific observations/facts, and social facts, even ways of thinking and observing, are social constructions rather than objectively and universally true (Nisbett, 2005). The capacity for subjectivity should be regained and retained, along with the ability to consider one's own relationship to the focus of inquiry.

Phillips and Burbules (2000) noted that knowledge of the world is conjectural, falsifiable, challengeable, and changing. Secure, once-and-for-all foundational knowledge and grand narratives of a singular objective reality are replaced by tentative speculation in which multiple perspectives and multiple warrants are presented by the researcher. The world is multi-layered, capable of tolerating multiple interpretations, and—depending on the particular view of post-positivism embraced—multiple external

realities exist, or knowledge is regarded as subjective rather than objective. Hence, the separation of fact and value in positivism is unsustainable: our values, perspectives, paradigms, and even research communities determine what we focus on, how we research, what research "shows" and how we interpret research findings, and what constitutes "good" research. This depicts the continuing existence of an objective reality but adopts a pluralist view of multiple, coexisting realities rather than a single reality.

### **Policy Framework and Secondary Education**

The Nigerian National Policy on Education stipulates that secondary education should be six years long, divided into two three-year stages: junior secondary school and senior secondary school. The policy document states that students completing junior secondary school should be streamed into: (i) senior secondary school; (ii) higher school; and (iii) continuing education in Vocational Enterprise Institutions (VEIs) (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014, p. 17). It further specifies that this streaming should be based on tests determining academic ability and vocational interest, aiming for a balanced approach. Regarding the senior secondary school stage, the policy document expects that the transition to tertiary education will occur through an appropriate selection mechanism. These policy expectations suggest that selection should be the primary focus of secondary education in Nigeria. This paper argues for integrating specialization and selection frameworks as the philosophical direction for secondary education in Nigeria.

Heckman and Carneiro (2003) assert that a growing body of evidence suggests that interventions beyond the age of 14 have limited impact on improving an individual's prospects. Given the diverse needs of students and varying teacher quality, the philosophical model for secondary education, particularly at the junior secondary school stage (for students aged 11 to 14), needs to be revisited. Integrating selection and specialization should be the guiding principle of secondary education policy in Nigeria because selection provides choices for schools, while specialization provides choices for parents/guardians.

This paper argues that selection, combined with specialization, is a diagnostic matching of demand and supply rather than simply admitting or excluding students from the same program. Selection promotes choice at the school level, usually based on ability or aptitude for particular subjects. Specialization enhances choice for parents/guardians based on the demand for different kinds of secondary schooling. Specialization reflects a consumer-driven response to parents'/guardians' aspirations for specific types of secondary education. It does not prevent schools from being academically selective. Selection often emphasizes traditional academic criteria, such as high pass rates in WAEC and high entry rates to universities and other tertiary institutions. Specialization empowers parents/guardians with greater choice in deciding the type of school that best meets their children's interests and needs. Parents desire schools tailored to their needs, moving closer to their desired level of education for their children.

This integration allows for the possibility that individuals with different ability levels and parental/guardian interests develop at different rates. Introducing a specialization model would help school counselors organize student specialization services, including providing information, collecting and adjusting data, and student placement. Specialization implies that learning achievement, non-academic achievements,

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examination performance, student interests, and parental attention must be included in student specialization activities. Specialization aligns with an inventory of interests and further studies.

Children are diverse in many ways. They differ in their learning rates and styles, their interests, their strengths and weaknesses in specific subjects, and the classroom environments that support or hinder their studies. Some children learn more effectively independently, while for others, direct instruction from a teacher is less effective than machine instruction or technology-aided learning. The premise is that specialization based on learning style differences should likely define children's schooling choices. Specialization and parental choice would resolve some divisive curriculum issues, allowing families to get what they want without imposing their preferences on others. Dworkin (2009) pointed out that specialization accelerates innovation, and replacing forced association (assignment by attendance areas) with matching choice would greatly reduce teacher-parent friction.

Specialization would enhance relevance and the attainment of useful living in society because parental choice would match teachers doing what they do best with children who would benefit based on their interests. Specialization would introduce higher-priority choice-making factors like curriculum, discipline, and pedagogy differences. Allowing families to match their children to the topics and methods best suited for them would eliminate many of the stark contrasts in the school system in a specialization scenario.

### **Addressing Issues of Secondary Education in Nigeria**

Dewey's principles of education emphasize that students learn by doing. This implies that students learn within a community that embraces democratic ideals. The assumption is that learning should be interdisciplinary and problem-oriented, and that secondary education should revolve around practical knowledge—that is, solving problems from one's pre-theoretical life with the aim of contributing to society. Pragmatism (an offshoot of progressive education theory), which prioritizes learning by doing rather than memorizing, should be emphasized at the secondary school level. Flinders and Thornton (2013) noted that Dewey's influence on education is evident in his theory of social learning. This theory posits that school should represent a social environment and that students learn best in natural social settings. Hence, secondary education is a crucial stage in learners' psychological development, including their social and moral development.

### **Conclusion**

Secondary school is a key agent of socialization, a place where people, especially adolescents, gather to exchange ideas and experiences. This aligns with Dewey's (1901) assertion that "the school more than any other social institution stands between the past and the future; it is the living present as reflections of the past and as prophecy of the future" (Dewey, 1969, pp. 7-8). Members of the secondary school community come together with diverse pre-existing experiences in a structured setting, such as a classroom or other learning space. These experiences are shared, tested, and refined, forming theory within the classroom. This theory is then communicated among school members to improve experience or practice.

Dewey's philosophy appears pragmatic. A core tenet of pragmatism is that theory is derived from practice and then applied back to practice to create intelligent practice. Every member of the school community comes together as a learner, based on their past experiences, as Dewey (1901) stated, in a living setting (like a school) to project the future. Hence, frequent social interaction occurs among school members. Dewey's philosophy of progressive education emphasizes that theory must be informed by practice to improve practice. The challenge is how to effectively integrate practice into theory in our rapidly changing society. Education should be related to contemporary social problems to remain relevant to human life. This resonates with objectivism in the epistemology of educational research, where the researcher constantly searches for "truth" based on post-positivism. This "truth" needs to be discovered through practice and subsequently transformed into theory.

The model for secondary education in Nigeria needs to incorporate the integration of specialization and selection frameworks as its philosophical direction. Specialization, an aspect of secondary education, has been neglected in the practice of streaming students in secondary schools. Specialization creates better matches between students and teachers, a crucial relationship for younger children developing specific interests in school programs. The argument is that the long-standing practice of selection by assigning students to any stream of secondary school should incorporate a specialization framework.

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