

PUBLIC MISSION SCHOOLS IN FOSTERING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND MORAL INTEGRITY IN ANAMBRA STATE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This study appraised the role of public mission schools in fostering academic excellence and moral integrity among secondary school students in Onitsha North Local Government Area of Anambra State. The study was guided by three research questions and adopted a descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised 150 respondents: 100 teachers and 50 students and parents drawn from five public mission schools within the study area. A well-structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. The findings revealed that public mission schools are highly effective in promoting academic excellence, integrating moral education into academic activities, and maintaining high moral standards. However, the study also identified several threats that limit their effectiveness in fostering academic excellence and moral integrity among secondary school students in the area. These challenges include inadequate government funding, parental negligence, and a shortage of qualified teachers, among others. Based on the findings, recommendations were made to encourage these schools to maintain their standards and to ensure proper examination of disciplinary structures in order to enhance students' academic performance. The government and parents were also urged to fulfill their responsibilities in empowering and supporting these schools.

Key Words: Mission Schools, Public Mission Schools, Appraisal, Academic Excellence, Moral Integrity

Introduction

The history of formal western education in Nigeria began with the establishment of schools by Christian missionaries in 19th century. The advent of the Missionaries in Nigeria and other African societies brought among other things, education. Through establishments of mission schools, missionaries helped to promote cross-cultural understanding, literacy, improve academic achievement and enhance moral integrity. This form of education that the missionaries introduced was basically aimed at producing sensible, refined, reasonable and responsible individual for both personal and societal development. According to Asadu (2018), A Mission School refers to an educational institution owned and operated by the Church. He opines that the primary aim of the missionaries for establishing such school is grass root evangelism. This schools established by religious organizations during the colonial periods was with the aim of providing formal education alongside religious instruction and moral training. After the civil war in 1970, the military forcefully took over these mission schools from the missionaries. Izuegbu (2012) mentions that the takeover of the schools from their original owners and subsequent management of those schools by the government affected the quality expected of schools. After about forty decades of the takeover of the schools, with glaring reduction in quality, the government of Anambra State reconsidered handing over the schools back to the Churches that were in charge of them. In 2011, the Anambra state government under the leadership of Mr. Peter Obi returned all the 1,040 schools to the churches that originally established them (The Sun, 10 September, 2019). Izuegbu states some of the reasons for the decision to include poor management, increase in indiscipline, reduced quality of the products of the schools, teachers' ineffectiveness, increase in social vices and other negative factors. This gave birth to a new partnership between the government and the Church in management of some schools in Anambra State. These schools that are co-managed by the government and the Church are referred to as Public Mission schools.

Using Onitsha as example in the current research, some of the schools include: Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Christ the King College, St. Stephen's Primary School, Queen of the Rosary College (QRC), St. Charles' College, Our Lady's Primary School among others. In view of this development, Izuegbu (2012) makes a case for what would be expected of the schools in terms of quality intellectuals and moral formation. Have the schools promoted academic excellence for which the decision for handing over was made? Is there improvement in the moral formation in these schools? Are their challenges facing these schools currently which hinder the expected

outcome? The current research therefore examines how far the schools have lived up to expectation in the areas of academic excellence and moral formation of the students having managed the schools for over fifteen years.

Conceptual Clarifications

Mission Schools

Asadu (2018) defined mission school as an educational institution owned and operated by the church, whose primary aim of establishment is for grass root evangelism. Ige (2021) defines mission schools as those schools originally established and managed by the Christian Missionaries, such as the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), Church Missionary Society (CMS), Methodist Mission, Baptist Mission, among others. According to him, these schools were established to carry out charitable work and promote Christianity. Ajah (2015) defines Mission schools as schools which integrate faith-based instruction into their curricula, serving as platforms for nurturing virtues like honesty, integrity, and compassion. By incorporating religious teachings alongside secular subjects, these schools align with Ajah's assertion that education should shape not just the intellect but also character. A school therefore is a mission school when it is established by a faith-based organization (Church).

Public Mission Schools

Public Mission Schools are schools that are run and managed by the mission (Church) and the government. The government partners with the mission to run these schools. According to Asiegbu (2018) such partnership could be best described as a model of Public-Private Partnership (PPP). In Anambra State, when Mr. Peter Obi became the governor of the State, he returned majority of these schools to their original owners, the missions. These returned schools are referred to as Public Mission Schools. The law which partially returned the schools to the mission provided partnership and shared responsibility in the management of the schools between the Missions and the Government (Anambra state, 2009). According to Asiegbu, the law referred to those schools returned to the mission as "Returned secondary schools". While the law granted ownership of the returned schools to the missions, it gives provision for government participation in the management of the returned schools, which is joint education management.

Academic Excellence

Academic excellence is the demonstrated ability to perform, achieve, and or excel in scholastic activities as Strategic Planning Organization (2019) holds. This can be achieved by creating an educative environment that can grow students intellectually, socially, and ethically and will help them pursue successful and fulfilling careers. Abdallah and Abdallah (2023) posits that academic excellence showcases an individual's ability to excel in school activities, with teaching and education service quality being crucial factors. Academic excellence hinges more on the teacher development. Teacher development helps in facilitating continuous improvement in the education areas as it assists the teacher to engage in ever evolving educational landscape. Alhosani et'al (2023) argues that academic excellence entails establishing healthy teaching and learning environment and maintaining it on sustained basis for the betterment of students and fundamental contributions to the society. Academic excellence goes beyond getting high grades and involves providing an environment for developing critical thinking, innovative skills, intellectual growth, and high academic standards. Academic excellence is the ability to perform noticeably well in educational pursuits, whether getting top grades, creating top-notch assignments, or wowing your professors with fantastic insights. It is deduced that academic excellence is a multidimensional concept that can be achieved through: Setting clear goals and objectives, through development of effective study habits, through the use of resources and support systems, through using technology for academic success and finally through managing procrastination and distraction.

Moral Integrity

Moral Integrity is commonly defined as a moral agent of wholeness and consistent behaviour. This view is based on its etymological roots from Latin word "integritas" which means intact, whole or harmonious (Becker and Talsma 2016; Huberts 2018).

Moral integrity is connected with the trustworthiness and reliability of people and predictability of behaviour. It is adherence to moral values and principles (Schottl, 2015). Moral integrity suggests the completeness and wholeness of something or someone. It deals with consistency. Moral integrity deals with moral commitment, identity-conferring commitments (identity/honesty) and acting according to the commitments (wholeness/consistency).

Moral Integrity can also be defined as behaving in an ethical manner in an educational setting.

The Impact of Takeover and Return of Mission Schools by the Government

After the Nigerian Civil War, in 1970, the government took over mission schools. Education became a huge government venture and no longer a private enterprise. According to Ajah (2015), Part of the reasons for the takeover as offered by the government were to provide stability, to satisfy people's educational and national need

and to combat nationalism, religious conflict and disloyalty to the cause of a united Nigeria. Other scholars note that some of the reported aims of the takeover were to create a unified educational system and address pre-existing regional imbalances and inequality in access to education (Uche and Udogu, 2022) posit. These reasons were laced with insincerity as proven by history.

Asadu (2018) argues that this forceful takeover of Mission schools by the military government reduced the quality of education and morality among students. Against its promises and contrary to all expectations, the experiment misfired and left most of the classroom teachers with terrible defect in credibility. Generally, the impact of the government takeover of mission schools can be summarized into three:

Rapid Decline in Educational Standards: The quality of education after this take over became lamentably low and the backlash against the government was enormous. Things would have been better if the status quo was maintained (Obi & Ezemba, 2019). Government were also unable to provide adequate facilities and materials which would ensure academic excellence. There were lack of qualified teachers, inadequate funding and there was a big shift from the holistic and extracurricular activities formerly implemented by the missionaries.

High Rate of Indiscipline among Students: Compared to the good days when the church occupied the driver's seat in education, there are teachers who cared and guided the students under watchful eyes of the missionaries (Ogara & Ezeodilii-Otti, 2022). When education was taken by the military government, teachers became uncommitted and uninspired to carry out their responsibility, this affected their labour of instilling discipline in the students giving way to unbridle and uncontrolled behaviours. It was said that removal of the strong moral and religious teachings brought a rise in student indiscipline and poor behaviour.

Perceived Drop in Moral Values and Integrity: Moral integrity was the watch word of the missionary schools. Christian values were inculcated such as respect and honour for elders and parents, hospitality, service, communal life, truthfulness, self-control and more. However, government takeover of mission school gradually saw an end to these moral values as students became rebellious and unruly. They found it difficult to abide by the school laid down rules and regulations. According to Onyechi (2014), the takeover of schools in 1970 was a political prescription which side effects are morals; a factor that was not considered *ab initio* and which remedy is the exclusive property of the church.

2.3.3 Quality of education in Public Mission Schools

On the other hand, looking at the situation of things when thw missions were solely in charge of the schools, Omede (2017) posits that mission schools in their hay days were very dignified, respected and held in a very high esteem. According to him, the product of these schools until recently were men of reputable intelligence and sufficient morality. The quality of education in public mission schools has attracted many parents to enrol their children or wards in the school.

Moral Education in Public Mission Schools

Moral education has always been a perennial and pivotal aim of education. Schools especially mission schools are set up not just for academics but also for moral stature.

Dorgu & Paingha (2022) explained that history of Nigerian education has been tied with colonial education, which in the first place emphasized moral education as a core curriculum and it is still reflected in Nigerian education. Various courses such as Christian Religious Studies, general studies, civic education and social studied all for the bedrock of moral education in Mission school. According to them, the goals moral studies education curriculum includes: fostering national unity, promoting national development, promoting individual development and self-fulfilment, promoting social equality and responsibility, promoting respect for and development of cultural heritage and promoting international consciousness.

They explained the significant roles Religious and Moral Education plays in a child such as:

- A. He stated that for a student to live a meaningful life and contribute positively to the development of his society, he needs religious and moral education to achieve this dream.
- B. Religious and Moral Education provides in-depth teaching and educate its members on the need to be law abiding, having spirit of faithfulness, dedication and spirit of strong commitment to work; loyalty and fair play in all circumstances.
- C. Religious and Moral education enable the Nigerian child to cultivate the habit of discipline. This involves the training of the mind and character to develop self-control habit, right social conduct and right attitude to life which are essential for survival of any society.

Moral education is whatever schools do to influence how students think, feel, and act regarding issues of right and wrong.

Abdulrahman (2020) laments on the outcries about Nigerian education which do not exude quality concern, inadequate facilities and equipment, moral decadence and all forms of indiscipline; having a toll on the society for decorum. He posits that moral is the standard requirement and expected code of behaviour considered

acceptable, not by an individual, but a group or society. In other words, moral and education are always meaningful if they are treated together. To him moral education is a process of getting the learner to develop responsible attitudes towards others, in fairness, under free and rational considerations and to develop also the skills of judgement after critical and logical reflections over what is considered to be right or wrong and the feelings of the others.

He proceeded by explaining that morality is strongly connected with childhood lifestyles and the different orientations they are given. Contemporary literatures have it that the school and home are the principal agents of moral education. The whole essence of schooling he argued is to positively influence the behaviours of the learners, consequently enable them leave school with such attitude the society will accept. According to him, formal education began with the missionaries, to bring up people in the ways of the Lord and be useful to the society through the teachings of religion and morals. Historically, the mission of schools has been to develop in the young, both the intellectual and moral virtues. Concern for the moral virtues, such as honesty, hard-work, responsibility, kindness and respect for others, is the domain of moral education which the missionaries strongly pursued.

European missionaries actually came for evangelism, but felt it was morally justified to give education which will assist them achieve proper spread of the gospel. Mission schools foster this culture of moral integrity by inculcating values through moral education and other spiritual activities which sets them apart from other public schools. They also achieve this by role modeling, mentorship, character formation programs, etc.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For the purpose of the current research to be achieved, the researchers administered questionnaires to effectively address the questions raised in the work. The results of the findings are presented in tables and analyzed using appropriate statistics.

Research question 1

Have the schools promoted academic excellence for which the decision for handing over was made using Onitsha as example?

Table 1:

Public Mission Schools in Promoting Academic Excellence.

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
1.	Public Mission schools provide better quality education than regular public schools	50	70	20	10	3.07	Accepted
2.	The structured discipline in mission schools influence students' academic performance.	15	35	55	45	2.13	Rejected
3.	Moral and religious teachings in public mission schools positively impact students' learning attitudes.	35	55	35	25	2.67	Accepted
4.	The presence of committed teachers in public mission schools enhances academic excellence.	45	65	25	15	2.93	Accepted
5.	Public Mission schools create a competitive academic environment that fosters student excellence.	48	63	21	18	2.93	Accepted
6.	Public Mission schools provide a conducive environment for effective learning in students.	45	60	25	20	2.87	Accepted
Total Mean						16.60	
Grand Mean						2.76	Accepted

From the table 1, items 3, 4, 5, and 6 with the mean scores of 3.07, 2.67, 2.93, 2.93 and 2.87 respectively were accepted because it is above the mean cut-off mark of 2.50, while item 2 with the mean score of 2.13 was rejected because the mean score is below the cut-off point of 2.50.

Thus, items 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 in table 1 answered the research questions stated above, that public mission schools play an insignificant role in promoting academic excellence amongst secondary school students.

Research Question 2: Is there improvement in the moral formation in these schools? **Table 2: How Public Mission Schools ensure Moral Integrity**

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	X	DECISION
1.	Public mission schools emphasize moral education as a key part of learning	48	63	18	21	2.93	Accepted
2.	Students in public mission schools exhibit higher moral integrity than those in government public schools	52	58	20	20	2.97	Accepted
3.	Strict discipline policies in public mission schools help shape students' moral behaviour	55	50	20	25	2.93	Accepted
4.	Regular religious teachings and instructions in public mission schools improve students' moral values	50	55	20	25	2.90	Accepted
5.	Public mission schools engage parents in ensuring the moral upbringing of students.	20	30	40	60	2.07	Rejected
6.	The Moral inclination of teachers in public mission schools help in students' moral upbringing.	45	60	20	25	2.87	Accepted
Total mean						16.67	
Grand mean						2.78	Accepted

From the table 2, items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 with the mean score of 2.93, 2.97, 2.93, 2.90 and 2.87 respectively were accepted because the mean score is above the cut-off point of 2.50, while item 5 with the mean scores of 2.07 was rejected because the mean score is below the cut-off point of 2.50. The grand mean is 2.78 showing agreement on the moral impact of public mission schools.

Research Question 3: Are their challenges facing these schools currently which hinder the expected outcome? **Table 3: Challenges Facing Public Mission Schools in Fostering Academic Excellence. (For Teachers, Administrators, and Parents)**

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	X	DECISION
1.	Lack of adequate government funding affects the quality of education in public mission schools.	42	38	5	15	3.17	Accepted
2.	Insufficient qualified teachers negatively impact the academic performance of public mission schools.	28	40	7	25	2.89	Accepted
3.	Overcrowded classrooms in public mission schools affect students' academic performance	18	32	35	15	2.53	Accepted
4.	Influence of technology poses a challenge to maintaining moral discipline in public mission schools.	25	62	88	75	2.09	Rejected
5.	Parental negligence affects students' moral development in public mission schools.	62	21	5	12	3.40	Accepted
6.	High tuition (fees) affects the expansion of public mission schools.	58	25	5	12	3.36	Accepted
Total mean						17.44	
Grand mean						2.91	Accepted

From the table 3, items 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 with the mean score of 3.17, 2.89, 2.53, 3.40, and 3.36 respectively were accepted because the mean score is above the cut-off point of 2.50, while items 4 with the mean score of 2.09 respectively was rejected because the mean score is below the cut-off point of 2.50. The grand mean is 2.91 showing a total agreement to the challenges.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that public mission schools provide high-quality education, which directly contributes to academic excellence among students. It was also observed that moral and religious instruction in these schools has positively impacted students' learning attitudes. This is further strengthened by the presence of committed teachers whose lifestyles and teaching practices encourage students toward academic excellence. This finding aligns with the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014), which states that no nation can rise above the quality of its teachers.

Public mission schools also create a competitive and conducive academic environment that fosters academic excellence among students. In addition, the findings revealed that these schools engage in a variety of extracurricular activities that help students exercise their minds, develop their potentials, and improve their skills. These activities constitute an important aspect of academic excellence.

Furthermore, the study revealed that public mission schools emphasize moral education as a key component of formal education. There are strict moral policies in these schools, which help to shape students' moral behaviour, coupled with regular religious instruction. This finding is in line with Dorgu and Paingha (2022), who stated that moral and religious education enables Nigerian children to cultivate discipline. Such education involves training the mind and character to develop self-control, appropriate social conduct, and positive attitudes to life, which are essential for survival in any society.

The study also revealed that lack of government funding, insufficient qualified teachers, parental negligence, and high tuition fees adversely affect the progress of public mission schools and indirectly impact students' academic performance and moral integrity. This agrees with the findings of Asiegbu (2018), who noted that the government has failed to provide adequate funding for mission schools. This failure has resulted in inadequate facilities such as poorly equipped libraries and laboratories, as well as a reduction in the number of government-employed teachers. Similarly, Asadu (2018) lamented the high tuition fees in mission schools, observing that many parents can no longer afford to send their children or wards to these schools due to the increasing cost of education. The findings also revealed parental negligence in supporting mission schools, leading to a weakened Parent-Teachers Association (PTA), which plays a vital role in employing and paying some teachers.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that public mission schools provide quality education that results in academic excellence among students. Moral and religious teachings in these schools positively influence students' attitudes and character development. However, there is a continuous decline in the number of qualified and committed teachers, leading to weakened discipline and ineffective control measures. Inadequate government funding has resulted in poor infrastructure, thereby undermining educational standards. Parental negligence and high tuition fees also negatively affect the academic growth of students and the overall effectiveness of public mission schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Public mission schools should be encouraged to maintain their standards and uphold their foundational principles.
2. The government should provide adequate funding to enable these schools to thrive, with funds directed toward the construction of new infrastructure and the improvement of existing facilities.
3. Parents should actively participate in school activities to ensure alignment between school values and the values instilled in their children at home.

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