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Submission date: 02-Jun-2025 06:10PM (UTC-0700)

Submission ID: 2588410571

File name: 3_oladimeji_106_117.docx (74.69K)

Word count: 5000

Character count: 32831



Head Teacher Leadership in Nigerian Basic Education: Responsibilities, Challenges, and Prospects

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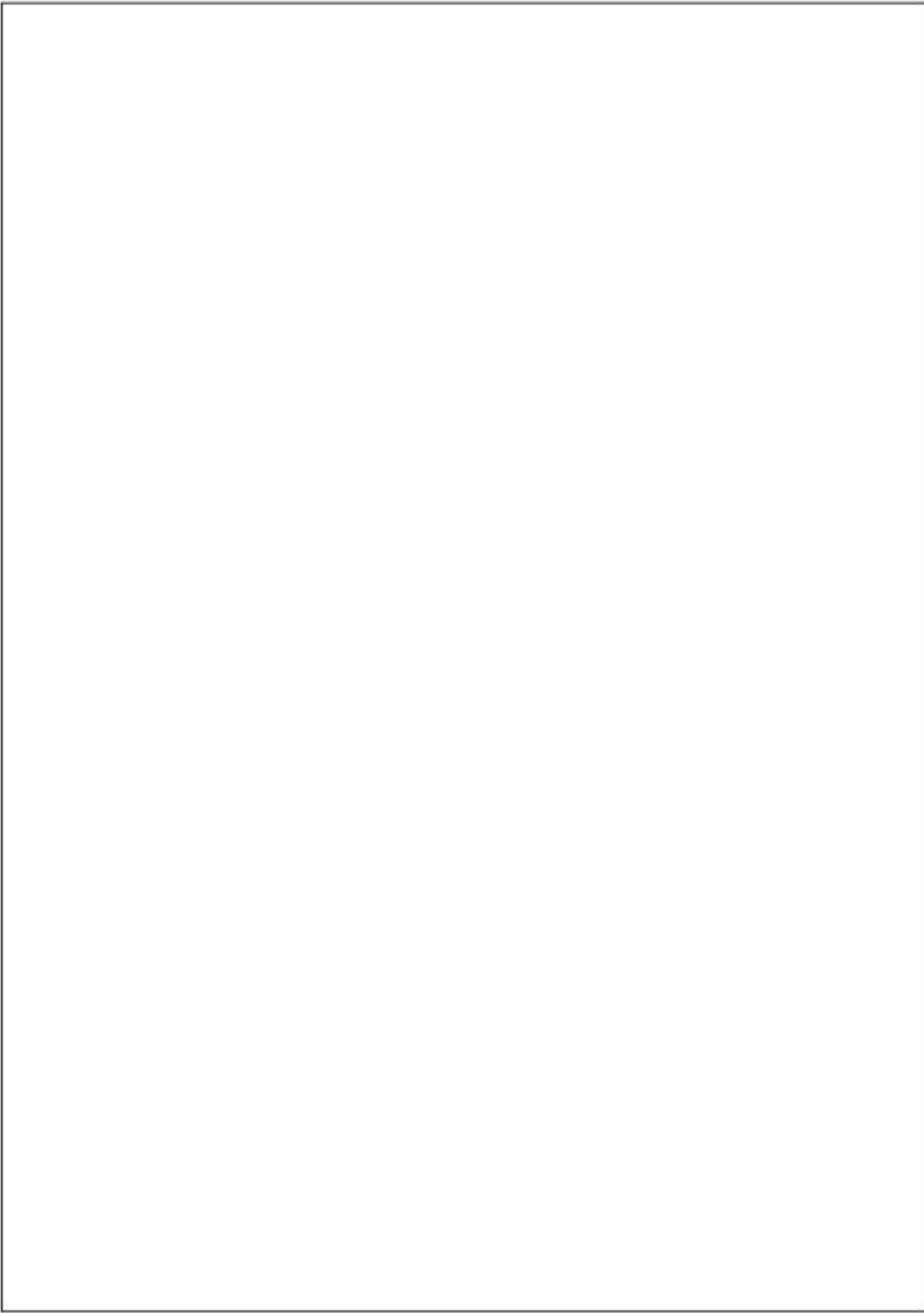
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Submitted : 25-10-2024 ; Accepted: 22-11-2024 ; Published: 25-12-2024

Abstract

Head teachers' administrative capacity and leadership heavily influence the effectiveness of basic education in Nigeria. However, in many public basic schools, particularly in Kwara State, systemic challenges such as overpopulation, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient funding hinder effective school leadership. This paper investigates head teachers' leadership responsibilities, challenges, and prospects within the Nigerian basic education framework. The paper is motivated by growing concerns over declining educational standards and the increasing complexity of school administration roles in the face of limited institutional support. Adopting a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, this paper synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journals, policy documents, and empirical studies to identify the core administrative duties of head teachers, assess the barriers they face, and propose strategic interventions. The analysis was guided by thematic synthesis and supported by critical appraisal tools to ensure the inclusion of high-quality literature. The paper reveals that head teachers are responsible for various functions, including instructional leadership, resource management, policy implementation, stakeholder engagement, and quality assurance. However, their effectiveness is undermined by student overpopulation, lack of professional development opportunities, indiscipline among staff and students, poor data systems, and inadequate funding. The paper concludes that empowering head teachers through improved training, inclusive leadership models, infrastructure development, and enhanced supervision mechanisms is crucial for educational reform. The paper contributes knowledge by offering a comprehensive framework for strengthening school leadership and guiding future policy decisions in Nigeria's basic education sector.

Keywords: *Educational Leadership, School Administration, Head Teachers, Basic Education, Nigeria*



INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, pursuing free, universal, and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 15 years gained formal momentum with the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act in 2004 (Perekeme, 2015). Although the concept of Basic Schools in Kwara State predates this law, it was only after the legislation's signing and the subsequent appropriation of funds in July 2005 that the program became operational at the state level (Onyekakie, 2022). The essence of UBE is to provide equitable access to quality basic education for all, a policy that has led to the steady expansion of educational infrastructure across the state. KwaraLEARN, an education programme by the government, includes all 1,578 public primary schools in Kwara, with 365 schools in year one and 2,028 institutions in the state (Yusuf, 2023). Basic education is the foundational phase of formal learning, aimed at nurturing essential cognitive, emotional, and social skills necessary for lifelong learning and personal development. According to Bamidele et al. (2024), the goals of basic education include ensuring access to quality learning, reducing school dropouts, facilitating re-entry for those who have left the system, and aligning educational content with learners' survival and development needs. It is also critical to Nigeria's strategy to meet the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education. At the core of any successful educational system lies effective leadership. The head teacher (or school principal) is indispensable in basic education.

Educational leaders are not merely administrators but catalysts of instructional improvement and institutional development. Ralebese et al. (2025) contend that instructional leaders must prioritise student achievement by cultivating learning environments that are both challenging and supportive. As the executive leader of a school, the head teacher bears ultimate responsibility for administrative and instructional functions. This includes organising and supervising daily school activities, managing resources, leading school improvement initiatives, and fostering professional development among teachers. The position demands managerial competence, strategic vision, pedagogical insight, and interpersonal skills. The head teacher is the critical link between the school's internal operations and the broader educational governance structures, including state education boards and community stakeholders (Gann, 2015; Okendu, 2012). According to Oyedele (2023), school administrators—from university vice-chancellors to primary school head teachers—are the operational leaders within the education system. Their responsibilities span planning, policy execution, supervision, and ensuring institutional goals align with national educational priorities. The success of basic education in Kwara State and Nigeria at large is intrinsically tied to the effectiveness of its head teachers. Their administrative capabilities, leadership styles, and capacity to engage with internal and external stakeholders significantly determine the quality and accessibility of education delivered in public schools.

Required Qualifications for Attaining the Position of Head Teacher

Attaining the role of a head teacher represents a pinnacle of professional achievement in the education sector, signifying a blend of extensive teaching experience, administrative competence, and leadership acumen (Ishaq et al., 2023). It is a role that demands academic excellence and the capacity to provide vision, direction, and stability within a school system. Ahmad and Batool (2018) state that the head teacher is central to a school's administration and instructional leadership. As such, the pathway to becoming a head teacher is typically shaped by progressive professional development, significant classroom teaching experience, and

exposure to school management duties—often beginning with roles such as classroom teacher, head of department, or deputy head teacher. In the Nigerian context and many educational systems worldwide, there are key academic and professional prerequisites that candidates must typically meet before being considered eligible for headship positions. These include:

1. Foundational Academic Qualifications

A prospective head teacher must possess a solid educational foundation, including five credits in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination or General Certificate of Education and a pass in English Language and Mathematics.

2. Postsecondary Education

Candidates must have completed the National Certificate in Education (NCE) or equivalent. However, preference is typically given to those with a Bachelor's degree in Education (B.Ed., B.Sc. Ed., or B.A. Ed.) or a subject-specific bachelor's degree accompanied by a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). In Nigeria, potential head teachers must be knowledgeable in content areas and trained in the pedagogical skills necessary for effective teaching (Kola & Sunday, 2015).

3. Professional Teaching Certification

A regulatory requirement is the attainment of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or a registered teaching license by the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN). This certification affirms the candidate's professional competence and legal authority to practice as a teacher within Nigeria's formal school system (Ezeugbor, 2017).

4. Extensive Teaching and Leadership Experience

Experience plays a pivotal role in headship appointments. Typically, a candidate must have at least 10 years of teaching experience, including several years in a supervisory or middle-management role, such as a deputy head teacher, head of department, or senior master/mistress. This experience ensures familiarity with curriculum implementation, student management, teacher supervision, and general school administration.

5. Administrative and Managerial Skills

In addition to academic credentials, aspiring head teachers must be able to lead their schools, plan, manage resources and budget, resolve conflicts, implement policies, involve the community, and supervise teaching (Suleiman et al., 2025).

6. Ongoing Professional Development

Head teachers are increasingly expected to engage in continuous professional development (CPD) through in-service training, workshops, educational leadership seminars, and postgraduate studies in educational management or administration (Faizuddin et al., 2022). Such opportunities keep school leaders abreast of policy changes, innovations in teaching and learning, and emerging challenges in school governance.

7. Administrative Responsibilities of Head Teachers

In the Nigerian educational context, the role of a head teacher is one of significant responsibility and complexity. The head teacher operates as the chief executive at the intersection of pedagogy, administration, and community engagement. They serve as managers of school resources and as leaders of instructional improvement and student development. The head teacher is entrusted with both vested authority (granted by official appointment) and entrusted authority (earned through professional competence and interpersonal trust) (Sasere, 2023). According to Leithwood (2016), the head teacher is the central figure in a school's teaching and administrative structures, functioning as a bridge between the school board,

teaching staff, students, and the broader community. This centrality places them in a bureaucratic, consultative, and supervisory role that requires them to interpret and implement educational policies, organise instructional and non-instructional activities, and ensure the overall functioning of the school environment. Agih (2015) and Usman (2016) have noted that administrative responsibilities fall into two broad categories: specific duties, such as supervision and school planning, and general duties, which include managing human and material resources, engaging the community, and fostering a conducive learning environment.

Core Administrative Duties of the Head Teacher

1. Planning and Policy Implementation

Planning forms the foundation of school leadership. The head teacher is expected to plan the school calendar, oversee recruitment, allocate teaching assignments, and organise staff meetings to discuss instructional goals and operational challenges (Usman, 2016). Planning extends beyond the start of the academic year; it is a continuous activity that informs budget formulation, resource allocation, and academic program reviews (Ogunode et al., 2021). Effective planning ensures the school's goals align with the national education policy and community expectations.

2. Organising the School System

Head teachers must ensure the systematic organisation of all school functions: **Instructional Program:** Setting educational objectives, monitoring curriculum delivery, and supporting teachers in instructional planning. **Co-curricular Activities:** Facilitating non-academic programs that enhance holistic student development, such as sports, arts, clubs, and community service. **School Plant Management:** Ensuring the maintenance of school buildings, provision of teaching aids, and availability of basic infrastructure such as libraries and laboratories. **Office Administration:** Managing clerical duties, documentation, correspondence, and financial records in compliance with education authority guidelines.

3. Instructional Leadership and Teaching

Though primarily an administrator, the head teacher is also an educator. Participating in classroom teaching models good practice for teachers and keeps the head teacher informed of instructional realities. This dual role as a teacher-administrator strengthens the instructional leadership function and enhances credibility among staff (Beltramo, 2016).

4. Supervision and Quality Assurance

Supervision goes beyond inspection; it involves mentoring, support, and ongoing evaluation. The head teacher conducts classroom observations, provides teacher feedback, monitors student discipline, and ensures that school operations—from laboratories to playgrounds—adhere to established standards (Chiwamba, 2022). Importantly, supervision should be constructive rather than punitive.

5. Guidance and Mentoring

The head teacher is expected to offer both academic and psychosocial guidance. They advise teachers on instructional strategies and students on academic and personal challenges. They also engage with parents and educational authorities to ensure that learners receive comprehensive support.

6. Stakeholder Relationship Management

Maintaining healthy relationships with various stakeholders is critical: **Staff:** Promoting teamwork, mutual respect, and professional development opportunities. **Students:** Creating a

safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment. Parents: Building trust and transparency through parent-teacher associations and open-door communication policies. Community: Involving local leaders and community members in school activities strengthens communal ownership and support for the school.

7. General Administration

As the head of the school, the head teacher is responsible for ensuring compliance with institutional policies, managing attendance, enforcing discipline, and ensuring the availability and efficient use of human and material resources (Jacob et al., 2020). Procurement processes must follow due procedure, and all expenditures should align with the school's approved budget.

8. Qualities Supporting Effective Administration

Beyond formal responsibilities, a head teacher's effectiveness is greatly influenced by personal and professional qualities, such as Sound educational philosophy and vision, high academic qualifications and professional training, competence in human relations and emotional intelligence, impartiality, self-discipline, and sound judgment. These attributes enable head teachers to administer and inspire, leading their schools toward improved outcomes and lasting impact.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to explore and synthesise existing research on the administrative responsibilities of head teachers in basic schools, focusing on Kwara State, Nigeria. A systematic literature review is a rigorous and transparent method used to identify, evaluate, and synthesise research evidence from existing studies to answer a formulated research question (Cooper et al., 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for this paper as it comprehensively examines scholarly perspectives, empirical findings, and theoretical contributions concerning head teachers' roles in school administration. The SLR method differs from traditional narrative reviews in following a structured protocol, ensuring reproducibility and minimising bias (Anderson et al., 2020). Through this method, the paper seeks to establish a consolidated understanding of the functions, challenges, and impact of school administrative leadership as performed by head teachers in Nigeria's basic education sector. The systematic review aimed to identify the core administrative responsibilities of head teachers in Nigerian basic schools, examine the qualifications, skills, and experiences required for practical headship, explore challenges head teachers face, and propose practical strategies to enhance their performance and improve school management. The paper conducted a comprehensive search across various academic databases to ensure the inclusion of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature on head teacher responsibilities, school leadership, qualifications, and challenges in Nigerian public schools. The search criteria included the enactment and implementation period of the UBE Act, publication in English, and focus on educational administration, leadership, or basic education in the Nigerian context or comparable settings. The selected studies were screened using inclusion and exclusion criteria, including empirical studies, theoretical articles, policy documents, official educational administration reports, and publications discussing Nigerian education systems or Sub-Saharan African contexts with similar governance structures. The extracted data were analysed using thematic synthesis, which involved coding the data into categories, developing descriptive

themes, and generating analytical themes to draw broader insights about head teachers' effectiveness and system-wide implications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Head Teachers in the Performance of Their Duties

Head teachers in Nigerian public basic schools, especially within the context of Kwara State, encounter many challenges that significantly impede the effectiveness of school leadership and administration. These challenges are rooted in structural and human resource deficiencies, often exacerbated by policy implementation gaps, inadequate funding, and weak institutional support (Bolaji et al., 2015; Enyiazu, 2022). The following subsections elaborate on the significant issues affecting the performance of head teachers:

1. Overpopulation of Students

A key challenge is the uncontrolled increase in student enrolment without a corresponding increase in teaching personnel and infrastructure. This disparity is particularly evident in regions where the enforcement of compulsory basic education has resulted in overcrowded classrooms, some accommodating over 100 students per teacher. Such conditions weaken the teacher-student relationship and strain the managerial capacity of head teachers, who must allocate limited resources under intense pressure. Programs like *Teach for Nigeria* and *N-Power* have been suggested to bridge the teacher shortfall, but their reach remains limited in many states.

2. Poor Maintenance and Inadequate Facilities

Numerous schools lack fundamental infrastructure, including sufficient classrooms, sanitation facilities, libraries, labs, and educational resources (Badmus, 2023; Salahu, 2020). Despite the UBE Act stipulating that federal, state, and local governments collaboratively support basic education, the execution of this obligation is uneven. Funds are often mismanaged or diverted, resulting in dilapidated or insufficient infrastructure. Head teachers are forced to operate under conditions that undermine staff morale and student performance without a conducive physical learning environment.

3. Institutional Capacity Gaps

Improvements have not matched the rapid expansion of student populations in institutional capacity. Issues such as limited classroom space, absence of science laboratories and libraries, and lack of technical equipment severely restrict teaching and learning (Asimegbe, 2019). This capacity gap also includes administrative challenges such as a shortage of qualified subject teachers, poor record-keeping systems, and weak internal communication networks. Head teachers struggle to implement programs effectively and maintain school standards without sufficient institutional support.

4. Lack of Accurate and Timely Information

School heads often lack access to accurate and up-to-date data needed for decision-making. Information such as teacher deployment, student enrolment figures, availability of learning materials, and infrastructure needs is either unavailable or inaccurately reported (Abdulazeez, 2021). Data is sometimes manipulated for political or ethnic reasons, affecting

policy implementation and school funding decisions. This creates administrative confusion and hinders effective school planning and reporting.

5. Indiscipline Among Staff and Students

Issues of discipline pose severe administrative burdens. Head teachers often deal with misconduct among students, such as truancy, fighting, theft, and dress code violations, as well as among staff, including lateness, absenteeism, and insubordination. These behaviours disrupt the school climate and, if left unchecked, affect the achievement of educational goals. In collaboration with parents and community leaders, establishing consistent disciplinary systems is essential to sustaining a productive learning environment.

6. Inadequate Funding

Perhaps the most pervasive issue is the **lack of financial resources**. Most basic schools rely on government subsidies and levies, which are often insufficient or delayed. Consequently, head teachers cannot fund key activities such as procurement of teaching materials, classroom repairs, extracurricular programs, or even teacher incentives. Lack of funds prevents head teachers from maintaining the school environment or supporting teacher development initiatives, leading to a decline in teaching quality and student outcomes.

7. Student Misbehaviour and Poor Parental Involvement

Student misbehaviour is often linked to weak disciplinary policies and a lack of parental supervision. Parents sometimes show little interest in their children's academic or behavioural development, making it difficult for schools to address issues like truancy or aggression. Head teachers, therefore, bear the burden of ensuring discipline, moral education, and academic motivation among students. Regular engagement with parents through meetings and awareness campaigns is critical to reinforcing shared responsibility for student conduct.

8. Incompetent and Untrained Teachers

Another critical challenge is the presence of unqualified or under-trained teachers in classrooms. Some are newly recruited and lack pedagogical experience, while others have received no in-service training to keep up with curriculum reforms. Ahmed (2023) rightly notes that continuous professional development is vital to effective curriculum implementation. Incompetent teachers contribute to student underachievement, classroom management difficulties, and poor assessment outcomes. Head teachers are expected to mentor such staff and arrange for their capacity development through workshops and collaborative learning.

9. Low Enrolment and Declining Revenue

Paradoxically, while overpopulation affects many urban schools, some rural schools suffer from low enrolment, often due to migration, poverty, or loss of public confidence in school quality. Low enrolment reduces internally generated revenue from fees and levies, weakening the school's ability to fund operations. If not addressed, low enrolment can lead to the closure of schools and reduced access to education in underserved areas.

Suggested Solutions to the Challenges Faced by Head Teachers

In light of the multifaceted challenges identified in the administration of public basic schools in Nigeria, especially in Kwara State, a series of pragmatic and strategic interventions is necessary to strengthen the role of head teachers and improve overall school performance. These solutions are designed to promote administrative efficiency, enhance instructional quality, and create an enabling environment for teaching and learning.

1. Strengthening Collaborative School Leadership

Head teachers should adopt inclusive and participatory leadership models, encouraging collaborative decision-making that involves teachers, non-teaching staff, students, and parents. This collective approach fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility in the school community. When head teachers delegate responsibilities and engage others in planning, it reduces managerial burden and improves trust and communication, leading to smoother school operations.

2. Implementing Regular In-Service Teacher Training

Continuous professional development (CPD) should be institutionalised to address teacher incompetence and professional stagnation. Head teachers must collaborate with educational agencies to organise periodic workshops, refresher courses, and seminars focusing on modern pedagogical techniques, curriculum reforms, classroom management, and ICT integration. Special attention should be given to newly appointed or underqualified teachers to raise their instructional competence.

3. Promoting Remedial and Peer-Led Learning Strategies

Schools should incorporate remedial classes, peer teaching, and group-based instructional activities to support slow learners and reduce learning disparities. These learner-centred strategies improve academic performance by offering targeted support to lagging students. Teachers can also conduct joint lesson planning and assessments with colleagues from high-performing schools to share best practices and improve learning outcomes.

4. Reforming Policy on Private Basic Education

Government policymakers should consider revising existing policies governing private basic schools to make them more supportive rather than restrictive. Excessive taxation, rigid curriculum prescriptions, and fee caps often discourage private investment in education. More communities can benefit from affordable, quality education by creating an enabling environment through flexible regulations and public-private partnerships.

5. Enhancing Supervision and Accountability Mechanisms

Regular and structured supervision and evaluation of schools are crucial for maintaining standards. Ministries of Education at the federal and state levels should deploy qualified inspectors to conduct scheduled and unscheduled school visits. These inspections should assess teaching quality, infrastructure condition, record-keeping, student discipline, and financial transparency. Supervision should be corrective rather than punitive, offering constructive feedback for improvement.

6. Enforcing the National Policy on Teacher-Student Ratios

The National Policy on Education recommends a maximum teacher-student ratio of 1:35 at the basic level. School administrators must ensure compliance with this standard to enhance teaching effectiveness. The government should prioritise the recruitment and equitable distribution of qualified teachers, particularly in densely populated schools. Adhering to this ratio also improves classroom management and student engagement.

7. Expanding Infrastructure through Multi-Sectoral Involvement

Infrastructure deficiencies can be addressed through the joint efforts of government, community leaders, private organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Communities should be encouraged to support school development by donating land, materials, or funds to construct additional classrooms, science laboratories, and libraries. Private sector involvement through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can also enhance school infrastructure and resource availability.

8. Ensuring Transparent and Effective Use of Funds

School funds, whether generated internally or allocated by the government, must be judiciously managed and transparently accounted for. Head teachers should be trained in basic financial management and required to submit periodic reports detailing how funds are utilised. Establishing school finance committees of staff, parents, and community members can enhance transparency and prevent misuse.

9. Fostering Parental and Community Engagement

Parents and community stakeholders are crucial in promoting student discipline, academic success, and school improvement. Schools should regularly organise parent-teacher meetings, community forums, and open days to discuss students' progress and identify collaborative solutions to school challenges. A strong parent-school partnership builds mutual trust and helps manage student behaviour and attendance.

10. Developing Accurate Data Management Systems

Accurate enrolment, teacher deployment, infrastructure, and academic performance data are essential for effective school planning. Schools should adopt simple digital or manual data systems to track critical metrics. These systems aid in needs assessment, resource allocation, and timely decision-making. The government should support schools with the necessary tools and training to manage data professionally.

11. Strengthening Disciplinary Policies and Support Services

To address the challenge of indiscipline, schools should enforce clearly defined codes of conduct for students and staff, supported by consistent disciplinary procedures. Furthermore, establishing school counselling units and guidance services can help address behavioural and emotional issues among students. Schools should partner with social workers and psychologists to provide specialised interventions where necessary.

12. Institutionalising Independent School Inspections

Independent school inspection units should be established or strengthened at the state and local levels to ensure continuous quality assurance. These units should operate autonomously and evaluate school performance against established benchmarks. Their reports should inform policy actions, funding decisions, and school improvement plans.

CONCLUSION

This paper critically examined the administrative responsibilities of head teachers in basic schools across Kwara State, Nigeria, emphasising the challenges they encounter and the practical strategies required to strengthen school leadership. Drawing upon a systematic review of relevant literature and empirical findings, the paper highlights the pivotal role of head teachers as institutional leaders, instructional supervisors, and community liaisons within Nigeria's Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy framework. The Universal Basic Education programme, while commendable for its ambition to offer free, compulsory, and quality education to children aged 6 to 15, has exposed significant systemic weaknesses, especially in the operational dynamics of school administration. As this paper reveals, head teachers are often overwhelmed by many challenges. However, they are not limited to: overpopulation of students, inadequate facilities, institutional capacity gaps, poor data management, low funding, staff indiscipline, and the employment of underqualified teachers. These challenges not only impede the ability of head teachers to discharge their responsibilities effectively but also threaten the overall quality of education delivered at the basic level. The paper also found that many of these problems are structural, rooted in weak policy implementation, insufficient supervision, and limited stakeholder engagement. It is clear from this paper that head teachers play a transformative role in school effectiveness, and their administrative capacity directly influences student achievement, teacher performance, and community trust in the education system. Therefore, strengthening their leadership capabilities and institutional support systems is essential to realising the broader objectives of Nigeria's basic education reform. In conclusion, for Kwara State—and Nigeria at large—to meet its educational development goals, concerted efforts must be made by government, education stakeholders, communities, and school leaders to address the institutional, financial, and human resource challenges impeding school administration. Head teachers can only be empowered to serve as effective stewards of educational progress in the country's foundational schooling system through coordinated, well-implemented reforms.

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