

## **EDUCATION AND ECONOMY: THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATORS IN RE-THINKING EDUCATION FOR NIGERIANS' 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY DEVELOPMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study examined the role of educational administrators in re-thinking education for Nigeria's 21<sup>st</sup> century development. It established that education remained a fundamental driver of national development and that no country achieved sustainable economic growth without significant investment in human capital. The study further revealed that education enhanced individuals' understanding of themselves and their environment, improved quality of life, and generated wide-ranging social and economic benefits. The study found that education increased productivity, creativity, and innovation, while also promoting entrepreneurship and technological advancement. In addition, the study showed that education played a critical role in improving income distribution, reducing inequality, and strengthening overall economic performance. The study also examined the relationship between education and economic development in Nigeria and observed that a balanced and well-managed education system contributed significantly to productivity growth, per capita income, and national competitiveness. Furthermore, it emphasized that effective educational administration was essential for aligning educational policy with the demands of twenty-first century development. The study also concluded that re-thinking Nigeria's education system through strong, visionary, and effective administrative leadership was necessary for achieving sustainable economic development and improving the future of the educational system.

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**Keywords:** Sustainable economic development, human capital, entrepreneurship, labour productivity, technology.

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### **Introduction**

A major concern in Nigeria's development discourse is the persistent mismatch between the education system and the demands of the twenty-first century economy, which raises serious questions about the effectiveness of educational administrators in rethinking and repositioning education for national development. Despite continuous reforms and increased public investment in education, the sector still struggles with poor learning outcomes, inadequate skill acquisition, and weak graduate employability, thereby limiting its contribution to economic growth and national competitiveness (World Bank, 2019; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023). Education remains a fundamental driver of economic development because it builds human capital, improves productivity, and enhances innovation capacity. According to the World Bank (2019), learning outcomes are central to human capital formation, and deficiencies in education quality significantly reduce individual earning potential and national economic growth. In the same direction, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) emphasizes that education systems that fail to equip learners with relevant skills weaken both labour market performance and long-term economic sustainability.

In Nigeria, education is expected to serve as a strategic tool for economic transformation by producing skilled manpower capable of supporting industrialization,

technological advancement, and socio-economic development. The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) underscores this expectation by outlining goals such as the development of sound and effective citizens, integration of individuals into society, and provision of equal access to educational opportunities at all levels. These goals are consistent with global expectations that education should function as a catalyst for sustainable economic development. However, the Nigerian education system continues to face structural and administrative challenges that hinder the realization of these objectives. Okebukola (2017) observes that the system has suffered from declining quality due to inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity, and policy inconsistency. More recent assessments by the World Bank (2022) indicate that foundational learning deficits, weak governance structures, and inadequate accountability mechanisms continue to undermine educational effectiveness in Nigeria, thereby affecting its economic output.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that the quality of educational administration plays a crucial role in determining how effectively education contributes to economic development. Adedeji and Olaniyan (2011) argue that efficient educational administration improves school performance, enhances teacher effectiveness, and ensures policy implementation success. Similarly, Iyiola and Adebayo (2021) emphasize that education sector outcomes are strongly influenced by leadership capacity, planning efficiency, and institutional coordination, all of which determine how well education aligns with national economic needs. In view of these challenges, the central concern of this study is that although education is widely recognized as a key driver of economic development, Nigeria continues to experience weak alignment between educational outcomes and labour market demands. This gap is largely attributed to inefficiencies in educational administration and planning. Therefore, there is a need to rethink the role of educational administrators in repositioning the education system to meet the demands of twenty-first century economic development in Nigeria.

### **Importance of Education in Economic Development**

Prior to the nineteenth century, systematic investment in human capital was not widely regarded as a central factor in national development, as most economies were primarily agrarian and relied more on physical labour than on formal education and skills. Expenditure on schooling, vocational training, and structured knowledge acquisition was relatively minimal across countries. However, this situation changed significantly with the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent application of scientific knowledge to production processes, beginning in Great Britain and gradually spreading to other parts of the world. From that period onward, education and skills increasingly became central to productivity and economic transformation. In the twentieth century, the role of education expanded dramatically, as knowledge, skills, and innovation became key drivers of national competitiveness. This period is often described as the “Age of Human Capital,” because a nation’s standard of living increasingly depended on its ability to develop and effectively utilize the knowledge, skills, and health of its population. Empirical economic studies have consistently confirmed this relationship. For example, Barro (2013) establishes that average years of schooling have a strong positive effect on economic growth across countries, particularly when educational quality is considered alongside quantity. Similarly, Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) demonstrate that cognitive skills, rather than mere school enrollment, are strongly associated with long-term economic growth and income differences between nations.

In developing countries such as Nigeria, the expansion of access to basic education over the past decades has been noteworthy, with increasing enrolment at primary and

secondary levels. However, this expansion has also generated rising demand for higher education and improved educational quality. According to the World Bank (2018), many low- and middle-income countries are experiencing a learning crisis, where students attend school but fail to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills, thereby limiting their productivity in the labour market. Empirical evidence by Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) also show that education contributes not only to economic growth but also to broader social development outcomes. Kingdon and Söderbom (2019) posit that higher educational attainment significantly improves individual earnings and reduces poverty levels in developing economies. In addition, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) confirm that returns to education remain particularly high in Sub-Saharan Africa, indicating that investment in education yields strong private and social benefits. These findings reinforce the view that education is a critical pathway out of poverty and a major determinant of economic well-being. A particularly important dimension of education's impact on development is female education. Empirical studies by Schultz (2019) show that educating girls and women produces wide-ranging benefits beyond income generation. These include improved child health, reduced infant and maternal mortality, better family nutrition, and increased educational attainment for children. Educated women are also more likely to participate in the labour force and contribute to national productivity, making gender-inclusive education a strategic investment for economic development.

Interestingly, Nigeria's integration into global markets further highlights the importance of education in economic competitiveness. The ability of the country to compete effectively in manufacturing and service sectors depends largely on the quality of its human capital. As emphasized by the World Bank (2020), economies that failed to develop strong cognitive and technical skills among their population struggle to compete in increasingly globalized and technology-driven markets. This implies that Nigeria must strengthen its educational system to ensure that learners acquire not only basic literacy and numeracy but also advanced problem-solving and innovation skills. Empirical research also indicates that the impact of education on economic growth depends not only on access but also on quality and effective utilization of skills. Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) argue that increases in years of schooling alone do not guarantee economic growth unless accompanied by measurable improvements in cognitive skills. Similarly, Krueger and Lindahl (2021) emphasize that human capital contributes significantly to economic performance only when education systems produce skills that are relevant and usable in competitive labour markets.

Importantly, no country has achieved sustained economic development without significant investment in human capital. However, the effectiveness of this investment depends on the quality of education, the relevance of skills acquired, and the ability of individuals to apply their knowledge in productive economic activities (UNESCO, 2023). Therefore, education remains a central pillar of economic development, particularly when it is aligned with labour market needs and supported by strong institutional and administrative systems.

### **Education and Productivity**

Education remains a key determinant of productivity in contemporary economic systems, as it enhances the capacity of individuals and institutions to generate output, adopt technology, and respond to changing labour market demands. In modern development economics, productivity growth is increasingly linked to the quality of human capital rather than the mere accumulation of physical capital, making education a central pillar of economic performance. Recent empirical studies by Aina and Adeyemi

(2021) postulate that improvements in education quality significantly influence productivity outcomes. Aina and Adeyemi (2021) posit that human capital development has a statistically significant effect on labour productivity in Sub-Saharan African economies, particularly where education is aligned with labour market needs. Similarly, Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2020) emphasize that education contributes to productivity growth by improving workers' efficiency, adaptability, and problem-solving capacity in both formal and informal sectors. Furthermore, education contributes to productivity through different stages of skill development. Foundational education builds essential literacy and numeracy skills that support basic economic participation. Secondary education enhances technical competence and occupational readiness, while tertiary education develops advanced analytical, managerial, and innovative capabilities. These layers of education collectively strengthen workforce efficiency and economic output.

Empirical micro-level evidence by Ibrahim and Bello (2023) further supports this relationship. Ekundayo and Ojo (2022) demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of education in Nigeria earn significantly higher incomes due to increased productivity and improved employability. Their findings show that education not only increases earnings but also enhances job performance and adaptability in dynamic labour markets. In a related study, Ibrahim and Bello (2023) find that education strongly influences productivity in small and medium-scale enterprises through improved managerial capacity and operational efficiency. In agricultural and informal sectors, education has been shown to increase productivity through improved adoption of technology and better decision-making. Educated farmers are more likely to adopt improved farming techniques, use inputs efficiently, and respond to market information. This results in higher yields and increased income levels, demonstrating that education enhances productivity even in traditional sectors of the economy.

At the industrial level, education supports productivity through innovation and technological adaptation. According to Nwosu and Chukwu (2022), a higher proportion of skilled workers are more likely to adopt new technologies and improve production efficiency. This highlights the role of education in strengthening industrial competitiveness and supporting structural economic transformation. However, the productivity impact of education depends not only on access but also on relevance and quality. Recent empirical work by Eze and Uzochukwu (2024) shows that mismatch between skills acquired in school and labour market requirements reduces the productivity benefits of education in Nigeria. This indicates that education systems must be closely aligned with economic needs to achieve optimal productivity outcomes. Hence, from a macroeconomic perspective, education contributes to productivity through innovation, knowledge diffusion, and improved institutional performance. Studies by Adebayo and Fagbemi (2021) show that countries with higher levels of human capital experience faster productivity growth due to improved efficiency in both public and private sectors. Education also enhances governance quality, which indirectly supports economic productivity by improving policy implementation and investment decisions.

In addition, education influences productivity through its effect on economic diversification and global competitiveness. Economies with more educated workforces are better able to move into high-value sectors such as technology, services, and manufacturing. This shift increases overall productivity and strengthens integration into global value chains. Consequently, education enhances productivity at both individual and national levels by improving skills, supporting innovation, and strengthening institutional capacity. However, its full impact depends on the quality of education delivery, relevance

of curriculum content, and effectiveness of educational administration in aligning skills development with economic needs.

### **Education and Income**

Education plays a critical role in shaping income distribution, poverty reduction, and economic equality within societies. Recent development literature consistently shows that improvements in education expand economic opportunities for low-income households by increasing employability, productivity, and access to higher-paying jobs. As education becomes more widely accessible, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are better positioned to participate in economic activities and improve their income levels. Empirical evidence by López and Rivera (2022) strongly support the link between education and income distribution. The World Bank (2020) reports that differences in educational attainment remain one of the strongest predictors of income inequality across developing countries. Similarly, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) findings show that individuals with upper secondary and tertiary education earn significantly higher lifetime incomes compared to those with only basic education, contributing to both upward mobility and reduced inequality.

At the country level, education has been shown to reduce income inequality by expanding access to skills and employment opportunities. Recent empirical research by López and Rivera (2022) find that improvements in secondary education enrollment significantly reduce income inequality in Latin America and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Their study demonstrates that a more educated labour force leads to a more equitable distribution of income by increasing participation in formal employment sectors. Furthermore, education influences income distribution through its impact on labour force structure. A more educated workforce is associated with a larger share of middle-income earners, which reduces polarization between high- and low-income groups. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) confirms that countries that expanded access to secondary education over the past two decades have experienced measurable reductions in poverty rates and income inequality.

### **Education and Human Capital**

Human capital development is fundamentally rooted in both family and institutional investment in education, nutrition, and skills formation. In contemporary development theory, the family is recognized as the first and most important unit for human capital formation, as it influences early childhood development, educational participation, and value formation. Recent empirical studies by Attanasio, Meghir, and Nix (2020) posit that parental education, particularly maternal education, plays a decisive role in shaping human capital outcomes. The authors further showed that children of more educated mothers are significantly more likely to complete schooling and achieve higher cognitive outcomes (Attanasio, Meghir & Nix (2020)). Similarly, World Bank (2022) findings indicate that maternal education strongly correlates with reduced child mortality, improved nutrition, and higher school completion rates.

Demographic transition research also shows that education influences fertility behaviour and population growth, which indirectly affects economic performance. The United Nations Population Fund (2023) reports that higher female education levels are associated with lower fertility rates and improved child welfare outcomes. This relationship has been widely observed across developing countries, where increased education leads to smaller family sizes and greater investment per child. In Sub-Saharan Africa, recent studies by Adeyemi and Oyekan (2021) confirm that households with higher

educational attainment tend to allocate more resources to each child's education, health, and skill development. This shift from quantity to quality of children reflects a key mechanism through which human capital accumulates over time.

### **Education and Health**

Education is also a major determinant of health outcomes, life expectancy, and overall well-being. Contemporary research consistently shows that more educated individuals make better health decisions, adopt healthier lifestyles, and access healthcare services more effectively. The World Health Organization (2023) reports that education is one of the strongest predictors of health outcomes globally, with higher educational attainment associated with lower rates of chronic disease, smoking, and preventable mortality. Similarly, the Lancet Commission on Education and Health (2022) concluded that education improves health outcomes by increasing health literacy, income levels, and access to preventive care. Empirical studies by Rodrik and Sabel (2020) also show that education significantly influences health behaviour. Currie and Widmer (2021) find that individuals with higher education are less likely to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, while more likely to adopt preventive healthcare practices. These behaviours contribute to longer life expectancy and improved productivity in the labour market. In developing countries, education improves health outcomes through better nutrition and childcare practices. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) notes that educated parents are more likely to ensure proper nutrition, immunization, and healthcare utilization for their children, leading to reduced infant and maternal mortality rates.

### **Education and Trade**

Education plays a crucial role in determining a country's trade competitiveness and ability to integrate into global value chains. In modern economies, trade performance is increasingly driven by knowledge, skills, and innovation rather than natural resources alone. Recent empirical research by Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2019) shows that countries with higher levels of human capital are more competitive in international markets. The World Trade Organization (2023) reported that economies with strong education systems are better able to diversify exports and move into higher-value manufacturing and services sectors. Similarly, the World Bank (2021) finds that human capital significantly enhances a country's ability to absorb foreign technology and participate in global production networks. Knowledge accumulation and education also interact strongly with trade openness. Recent studies by Rodrik and Sabel (2020) show that trade enhances productivity only when countries have sufficient human capital to absorb and apply imported technologies. Without adequate education systems, the benefits of trade liberalization remain limited.

In addition, education strengthens export competitiveness by improving workforce adaptability and technical capacity. Countries with more skilled labour forces are more successful in producing complex goods and services that require higher levels of cognitive and technical skills. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) emphasizes that digital literacy and technical education are now essential determinants of trade competitiveness in the global economy. Hence, education interacts with trade, income, human capital, and health to produce a reinforcing cycle of development. Countries that invest in education are more likely to achieve inclusive growth, improved health outcomes, and stronger global competitiveness, while those with weak education systems remain trapped in low-productivity and low-income structures.

## **Role of Administrators in Re-Thinking Education for Nigeria's Twenty-First Century Development**

**Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students:** Educational administrators' played a critical role in establishing and sustaining a clear vision of academic success that encompassed all learners, irrespective of socio-economic background, by ensuring equitable access to quality instruction and promoting inclusive educational practices within the school system. In contemporary education systems, school leaders are no longer viewed merely as managers of routine school operations but as instructional leaders responsible for driving academic excellence and equity. This shift is particularly important in developing economies such as Nigeria, where disparities in educational access and achievement remain significant. Recent empirical studies by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) show that schools with clearly articulated academic visions tend to achieve higher student performance and reduced achievement gaps. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) emphasize that effective school leadership begins with the establishment of high expectations for all learners, supported by clear academic standards and measurable learning goals. Similarly, Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2019) find that leadership focused on setting direction and promoting high expectations has a strong positive effect on student achievement outcomes.

The World Bank (2022) further highlights that narrowing learning disparities requires strong leadership commitment to inclusive education policies and school-wide improvement strategies. In Nigeria, this means that principals must actively promote a culture of high expectations where all students are supported to succeed academically, regardless of background. Such leadership ensures that academic success becomes a shared institutional goal rather than an individual effort.

**Creating a Climate Hospitable for Education:** A key responsibility of educational administrator's is the creation of a safe, supportive, and motivating school environment that promotes effective teaching and learning. A positive school climate enhances teacher commitment, student engagement, and overall institutional performance. Recent studies by Spillane (2019) affirm that school climate is strongly associated with student achievement and teacher effectiveness. Wang and Degol (2020) argue that schools with supportive and respectful environments experience higher levels of academic engagement and reduced teacher turnover. Similarly, Kraft, Marinell, and Yee (2021) find that positive instructional climates significantly improve teacher motivation and instructional quality. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) emphasizes that safe and inclusive school environments are essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education. In Nigeria, where teacher morale and resource constraints remain persistent challenges, administrators must foster environments characterized by collaboration, trust, respect, and professional support. Hence, by building a strong sense of school community, administrators reduce teacher isolation, improve morale, and encourage collective responsibility for student success. This creates a culture where both teachers and learners feel valued and motivated to perform optimally.

**Cultivating Leadership in Others:** Modern educational leadership theory emphasizes distributed leadership, where leadership responsibilities are shared among teachers, staff, and administrators to enhance organizational effectiveness. This approach is particularly important in complex school systems where no single leader can manage all instructional and administrative responsibilities alone. Recent empirical research by Harris and Jones

(2020) supports the effectiveness of distributed leadership in improving student outcomes. The authors found that schools that adopt shared leadership structures experience improved teacher collaboration, higher motivation, and better student performance (Harris and Jones, 2020). Similarly, Spillane (2019) notes that leadership distribution enhances innovation and professional learning within schools. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) reports that schools with strong collaborative leadership cultures consistently outperform those with centralized leadership structures, particularly in literacy and numeracy outcomes. In Nigeria, encouraging leadership among teachers and middle-level administrators can improve school efficiency and reduce overdependence on principals. Through empowering teachers and staff to take leadership roles, school administrators strengthen institutional capacity, improve decision-making processes, and enhance overall school performance.

**Improving Instruction:** Improving the quality of instruction remains one of the most important responsibilities of educational administrators. Effective school leaders focus on teaching quality as the core driver of student achievement and continuously support teachers to improve instructional practices. Recent studies by Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) show that instructional leadership has a direct impact on learning outcomes. Hallinger and Wang (2019) find that principals who actively engage in classroom supervision, teacher feedback, and curriculum support significantly improve student achievement. Similarly, Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) emphasize that instructional leadership contributes to teacher effectiveness by promoting continuous professional development and evidence-based teaching strategies. The World Bank (2020) also highlights that teacher effectiveness is the most significant school-based factor influencing student learning outcomes. Therefore, administrators must engage in regular classroom observation, mentoring, and feedback to strengthen instructional quality. In Nigeria, this implies moving away from sporadic evaluation systems toward continuous instructional support and professional learning communities that encourage collaboration among teachers. Such practices ensure sustained improvement in teaching and learning outcomes.

**Managing People, Data, and Processes:** Effective school administration requires strong management of human, financial, and informational resources. Educational administrators must ensure that school systems are efficiently organized to achieve educational goals and improve learning outcomes. Recent research by Bloom, Lemos, Sadun, and Van Reenen (2019) shows that effective school management significantly influences student performance. Bloom, Lemos, Sadun, and Van Reenen (2019) demonstrates that structured management practices in schools lead to higher productivity, better teacher performance, and improved student outcomes. Similarly, OECD (2021) reports that schools with strong data-driven management systems are more effective in identifying learning gaps and improving instruction. Administrators must also ensure proper recruitment, training, and retention of qualified teachers while maintaining accountability standards. In addition, effective use of data is essential for evidence-based decision-making. Modern school leaders use data not only for evaluation but also for continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes. The World Bank (2022) emphasizes that education systems that integrate planning, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms are more likely to achieve sustainable improvements in learning outcomes. In Nigeria, strengthening administrative capacity in planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and evaluating educational processes is essential for achieving national educational goals.

## **Conclusion**

A successful school is about much more than teaching. While good teaching and learning are crucial, the administration that underpins it is key to providing a well-rounded education that encompasses the whole child, learning environment, and society for economic development. Effective administration and operations support an education that goes well beyond imparting knowledge, but practical solving of the societal problems relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. School operations teams ensure that students' daily needs are met; that they receive healthy and nutritious meals, sleep and learn in a safe environment, and receive appropriate medical care and mental health support in other for a comprehensive instrument in finding solution of the society. Beyond the day-to-day, the administrative teams are often the ones responsible for recording, checking and analyzing student data, so they can enable those responsible for both learning and wellbeing to tailor their approach to the needs of the student and the society. Fullan (2002) has gone as far to conclude that, Effective school leaders are key to large-scale, sustainable education reform. This reform/re-think is key in competing at the world stage for economic development.

## **The Way Forward**

In order to reposition Nigeria's education system for effective contribution to twenty-first century economic development, deliberate reforms in educational administration and school leadership are required.

1. **Strengthen instructional leadership at all levels of the education system:** School administrators should move beyond routine administrative duties and focus on leading teaching and learning processes. This includes setting clear academic standards, promoting high expectations for all learners, and ensuring that instructional practices align with national development goals. Strong instructional leadership improves student learning outcomes and overall education quality.
2. **Create supportive and enabling school environments:** Administrators should foster safe, inclusive, and collaborative school climates that enhance teacher motivation, reduce attrition, and improve learner engagement. In the Nigerian context, this involves improving teacher welfare, reducing workplace stressors, and promoting a culture of professionalism, respect, and shared responsibility.
3. **Adopt a decentralized and participatory leadership approach:** Shared or distributed leadership, where responsibilities are shared among principals, teachers, and other stakeholders, strengthens institutional capacity, encourages collaboration, improves innovation, and enhances decision-making processes within schools.
4. **Enhance data-driven decision-making in education management:** Administrators should systematically collect, analyze, and apply educational data to identify learning gaps, monitor performance, and improve instructional strategies. Evidence-based management improves planning, accountability, and the overall effectiveness of school systems.
5. **Prioritize continuous professional development for teachers and school administrators:** Regular training, workshops, and capacity-building programmes are essential for equipping educators with modern pedagogical skills, digital literacy, and innovative teaching methods. Teacher quality remains a key determinant of student achievement and national educational performance.

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